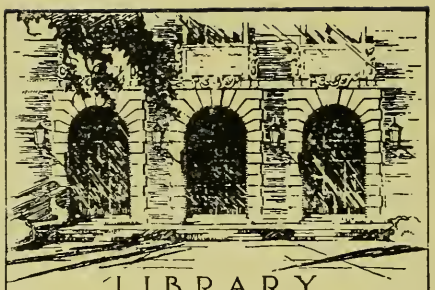

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CHRISTINA NORTH.

VOL. I.

CHRISTINA NORTH.

BY

E. M. ARCHER.

"His life is as a woven rope,
A single strand may lightly part:
Love's simple thread is all her hope,
Which breaking, breaks her heart."

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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CHRISTINA NORTH.

CHAPTER I.

It was early in March, but the winter had been a mild one. The snows had melted, leaving the snow-drop and the crocus to show their heads above the soft damp earth, and the lilac buds were growing larger every day. Even the White House was not unvisited by tokens of spring; there were a few daisies in the grass-plot before the windows, and the sunshine had crept into the darkened rooms. It was not a cheerful dwelling-place. The brown hills surrounded it on all sides but one; a stony, winding road in front divided it from the woods and park enclosures of Cranford Manor, and the wooded hill overshadowed it on the south, while to the north another hill rose

up in the distance bounding the moor. The gate was swinging in the wind, for no one had cared to fasten it; and the creepers were hanging down from the wall, for no one had thought of nailing them up. Inside there were long stone passages, and large low rooms; a wainscotted study at the back of the house, where old Mr. North sat with his books, the relics of happier days; and an old-fashioned, white-washed kitchen looking out on the road, where his granddaughter Christina was standing this afternoon, close by the window, with her knitting in her hands to catch the last gleam of sunlight; for the twilight was deepening in the further recesses of the room, and the glow of the fire was lost in the large grate and wide chimney-corner.

Even seen by the charm of the flickering, uncertain light, there was nothing picturesque or attractive in the bare red-tiled kitchen: nothing except the figure of the girl; a tall, slight figure, in a dark-blue gown, leaning against the side of the window.

Though her face was in shadow, you could see that she was very pretty; beautiful, some people would have said, if they had seen her in a passing flush of happiness or excitement. Her eyes were cast down at this moment, but they were dark, quick gleaming eyes, which could light up at times; and her mouth was grave, and her face had a cloud upon it; but it was a face across which smiles were driven with the suddenness and rapidity which belong only to the time when sorrow is a stranger and hope is young.

She lived in the midst of poverty and regret and disappointment, but as yet she had not by experience made these things her own. As to poverty, she had been used to it nearly all her life, and made no account of personal privations; she could not remember happier days, and hope was still strong within her; yet, insensibly, the atmosphere in which she lived oppressed her, and she grew sad and impatient at times, striving to free herself from the oppression, and believing, with the strange

unquenchable ardour of youth, in something higher and more beautiful which she should find some day: looking to the future with that half-conscious longing after change and happiness which belongs to a life spent as hers had been, in solitude and narrowness and petty cares.

Her grandfather spoke with a lingering regret, and yet with pride and pleasure, of his earlier days; days when he was the Squire of "the Park;" when his son had not deceived him and squandered his property; when his friends had not turned from him and his servants deserted him. Her mother, too, lived in the remembrance of what had been. Her husband had reduced her to poverty, and died miserably in a foreign land; but she could still look back to the time when she had believed in him, when he had been kind and loving, and she had thought him heroic; when his pride in his little daughter had called out all the softness of his nature; when she had leant upon his strength and thought him true. Yes, these were memories

even for her, though life had taught her a hard lesson, and she had not learnt peace or submission. Now she was a middle-aged, discontented woman, and could no longer hope either for herself or for her child. She had seen Christina grow up free and frank, and beautiful and happy, even in her unsatisfied longing for the glories which must await her somewhere; and the mother knew, or thought she knew, that disappointment and sorrow, and death in life, were creeping over her girlhood. Hope had died within herself, and she would have liked that it should have died within Christina. Sooner or later all must end in misery or disappointment. Hope was a snare, a folly, a vision to be thrust aside;—so she went on singing its dirge, singing it in Christina's ears; but Christina laughed, and shook her head, and would not listen.

She would not listen even this afternoon, when there seemed to be no escape from the vexations and household cares: though bitterness and anger were surging up in her heart, she would not acquiesce.

"There is no end to it, Christina," her mother had said; "why will you expect anything else? Our life must be a struggle,—it is always so in this world. Everything ends in disappointment. Be thankful that you have a home, and that nothing worse is likely to befall you: you have much to be thankful for."

Then she had answered that she would not believe it—that a change *must* come some day—that it could not always be the same succession of small duties and grievances—that there must be something higher and happier and more exciting in store for her. What it should be she did not know, she did not even care to imagine; but she knew that it would come.

"I cannot grow old like this, and never have anything, and never see anything, and never know anything. I must do something else before I grow into a sad woman like you, mother, who think only of what is past: and even *you* have something to look back to."

So Christina had said; and her mother had only sighed in answer, and then she had gone back to her account-books; and Christina had snatched up her knitting, and was hanging her head discontentedly over it, impatiently moving her needles, as she stood by the window in the twilight.

Suddenly she looked up at the sound of a footstep on the pebbled garden path, and saw a young man coming towards the house with a basket slung over his shoulder. This was Bernard Oswestry, her cousin, a near neighbour and constant visitor at the house. People said he was very like his uncle, Christina's father; if so, Richard North must have been a very handsome man. Bernard was hardly a handsome man as yet; you would rather have called him a beautiful boy, though he was one-and-twenty, three years older than his cousin, and, like her, tall, though slight. He was fairer than she was, with sunnier hair, and a more ready smile; altogether, the family likeness was more apparent in the freedom of carriage and general

bearing, than in the minuter details of feature and expression.

Christina had looked up at the sound of his footstep, but her face did not brighten, nor did she turn to meet him, when he came in flinging down his cap upon the table, and setting down his basket. He had come in bringing a breath of freshness, health, and happiness, with the rush of the outer air; but Christina was not ready to be touched by it.

"Why, Christina," he said, "what are you doing? you must be putting out your eyes."

"I can see quite well," said Christina pettishly, and gave a little wilful pull at her worsted, and the needles slipped in her hands, and the stocking unravelled itself so fast that the stitches ran after each other, and the ball rolled on to the floor.

"How tiresome you are! it is all your fault," said Christina; "I wish you had to pick those stitches up again."

She turned from the window, threw down her work, and, going to the fire, lighted one of the high candle-

sticks which stood on the chimney-piece. When she returned for her work it was in Bernard's hands, and he was patiently doing his best to repair the mischief. His mother sometimes said that his dexterous fingers were as useful as a girl's, and if he had not so much experience as Christina, he had far more patience; so she stood by, and the cloud gradually cleared from her face as she watched him at his work. She had not welcomed him, nor did she thank him now; but she brightened and smiled, and began to talk.

"What have you got in your basket? Fish—oh, how charming! Really, Bernard, you are delightful. It is just what I wanted. Janet, here is some fish for your master's dinner. Janet!" and she danced over the stone floor and along the passage into some remote region where Janet was busy at her work.

When she returned her cousin had laid aside the stocking, and was shaping something out of a piece of wood with his knife as he sat in the chimney-corner. Christina's good humour was quite restored, and she too sat down, disposed to be gracious, at the other

side of the hearth. After all, here was some one quite ready to sympathize with her and think her right; and that in itself was a soothing thought. She would never have complained to a stranger, her pride and her loyalty to her grandfather would alike have made it impossible; but as to Bernard, he was different, and was as nearly related to him as she was herself.

"Mother says we shall be ruined: I am sure I wish we could, and have done with it!" she said, ending her story: and then she laughed; but the laugh had something of bitterness in it.

As for Bernard, he did not either expostulate or reason; he was not even sorry for Christina. All this weariness and anger and impatience of her lot in life was tending in one direction; and although he did not exactly put it to himself in words, he knew it, and the knowledge was dear to him. It could not be *now*, of course, but some time or another, some time he would be able to come forward as a deliverer. How the idea had first sprung up within him he did

not know, nor did he care to inquire; it dated a long way back, he knew, back to the time when they went nutting together in the autumn woods, when they had gathered primroses in the valley, and when they had roasted chestnuts on the kitchen hearth; back to the time when they had been children together; back to the time when his schoolboy savings had been spent upon her first silver thimble. He could not give her wealth, perhaps; but what did it matter? at least she should have freedom and sunshine, and a happy home. Christina, too, was content that it should be so. The idea did not dwell with her as it did with him—it did not mingle in her dreams by night or her thoughts by day; but when she was troubled and impatient, and weary of her life, then she too looked on to the time when she should escape from it all to the homestead on the hill, where peace reigned with all its pleasant sights and sounds; where, as she thought in her ignorance, murmuring and discontent and anger must be hushed. Then it was that she thought of that day when they had stood together on

the moor a year ago; of his words, and of the promise that she had made, and of the spray of purple heather she had given him as a pledge. No one else had even guessed at it, unless, perhaps, his mother, and she had never spoken of it even to him. Perhaps she hoped that the boyish fancy might die out; and as for Christina, why should she care to speak of it? There was no sympathy to be had, even if she had wanted it, and, as a matter of fact, she did not want it. Besides, it was only in times of vexation, as I have said before, that she thought of it herself. This was the reason that at this moment it flashed across her mind, and for the time their thoughts were the same.

"It will come to an end some day, I suppose," said Christina; "but I don't know. So many things may happen, you know; you might change,—I might change. Many things might happen. I might die first."

"Why do you say that?" said Bernard. Her words had brought a passing cloud over his sunny

face. Christina always gave way to her moods, and said what was in her mind, and he was used to it; but nevertheless, her speech gave him a slight shock. Why should she think of change or death just now, when only the present was pressing upon her, and to him at least the future was full of so bright a promise?

"Why do you talk of change?" he said again. "How can I change? What can happen?"

"I don't know. How can I tell? But I suppose things *may* happen, even here!" said Christina, with a little shrug of her shoulders; and then she repented herself of having damped his spirits, and smiled at him affectionately. "But I have not changed yet, Bernard, not yet;" and if Bernard had any misgivings left, he put them aside for the time.

He walked home that evening, towards the quiet, grey house on the hill-side, where his mother was waiting for him, not thinking of the future with any apprehensions; indeed, he was not thinking of the future at all, but of Christina's looks and words as

he had parted from her; of the light flickering upon her hair as she sat in the circle of fire-light, of the familiar places, of old times, and childish memories. He did not think that she was beautiful, or kind, or charming; she was simply Christina, and that was all, but she was everything to him.

It was a trifling incident which first interrupted his thoughts,—an ordinary sight which would have had little effect upon him at another time, perhaps, but which now, breaking in upon his meditations, more or less jarred upon his mood of mind. It was simply that, through a gap in the trees of Cranford Park, he could see from the road, lights twinkling in the windows of the house which lay within.

"Then they have come back," he said to himself. "Christina was right; things happen even here."

And what did it matter to him? He would have said nothing, only he was dreaming dreams, and those shifting, restless lights disturbed him, and the moonlight would have been pleasanter without them.

CHAPTER II.

WHEN Bernard was gone, Christina sat for a few minutes meditating; then she gave a little sigh, and, rousing herself, she too left the kitchen; but her sigh and her meditations had nothing to do with Bernard. He had been, and he had gone, and for the moment he had cheered her, but his visits could not change the character of her life, or even make epochs in it. If her mother had been a little less sad, if her grandfather had been a little less bitter, it might have been different; then she might have spoken to them of her future, and of Bernard's hopes; but to speak now would only be to raise a storm of anger and incredulity. Perhaps after all they were right, and she was wrong; perhaps it might be true that happiness

was a wandering, deceptive light; that it would always dance before her eyes, and never take a form. So she went down to the evening meal with still a little cloud hanging over her brow.

Old Mr. North never forgot that, as people say, "he had seen better days." He might be poverty-stricken, aged, and forsaken, but in his own eyes, at least, he was still Geoffrey North, the great man of the parish, the Squire to whom the Park belonged. He had had misfortunes, but he refused to recognize the fact. "Family reasons made it desirable for me to give up my establishment and come to live here," he was accustomed to say with an assumption of dignity which had something pathetic in it; "and this quiet life suits me in my old age." He seemed able to ignore the truth, so long as he had only himself to deceive, but dreaded to read it in strangers' eyes; and refusing to see those few friends who would have been glad to seek his society, he shut himself up with his books and his recollections, which sometimes must have been sad enough. He sat at the head of

his table with his bottle of untouched port before him, and still talked of country business and foreign affairs, and the folly of men, as if his opinion was of the highest importance; but "nothing should tempt him back into active life," so he said with uncalled-for determination.

Christina had smiled at it all sometimes, for she was not old enough to be touched by the piteousness of the mockery; but to-day she was simply indifferent, and leant back in her chair gazing at the reflection of her own cloudy face in the polished wood.

"Mr. Warde is coming to dinner to-morrow," her mother was saying. "He wants more money for his school, I suppose; he is always wanting money."

"He does not want it for himself," said Christina, rousing herself a little indignantly.

"I suppose we all want money when we can get it," said her grandfather: and then silence fell upon them again.

Afterwards, when Christina went up the narrow stairs to her little room on the upper story, though

she was fond of it in a way from habit and old association, she still looked with a sort of impatience at the familiar surroundings—the engraving of the Good Shepherd over the mantel-piece in the frame which Bernard had carved, the old panelled chest of drawers, the japanned dressing-table, the flower-pots in the window, and the work-stand in the corner. There was no attempt at ornament, nor any of the little fanciful arrangements which girls are so fond of, but yet Christina was attached to the room, and would not have changed it, as her mother had often suggested, for a larger and more comfortable one.

Perhaps it was because she looked on it as a sort of refuge; *here,* at least, she could be quiet and alone. Not that solitude always suited her; it did not suit her this evening, and therefore it was that she put down her candle on the table, and went to the window, pushing back the curtain and looking out into the night.

It was a clear spring night, and she could see

across the road, white in the moonlight, on to the dark line of the trees of the Park. She did not look in that direction, but, leaning out, cast her eyes over the moor, and the indistinctly shadowed hill, on the side of which stood the grey house to which Bernard had taught her to look as her future home. There, at least, she would find peace and love, and kind words. There was no hope or longing within her, but still she did look to that as the end which she desired. She turned, soothed and partly consoled; after all, some one there, she knew, was thinking of her, and looking forward to that time; and then, as she turned, she caught sight of those lights twinkling in the upper windows of Cranford Manor, which had broken in upon Bernard's meditations. There was nothing magical in them; they were ordinary lights enough, giving evidence of human life within the house. And yet in Christina's eyes these were not ordinary, but as interesting and exciting as they were unexpected.

"They have come back," she said to herself, as

Bernard had said it to himself, with another meaning, and in another mood.

There was nothing distinct or defined in the pleasure with which she looked once more at the distant lights before she lay down to rest.

The Park had long been shut up, and it was long —very long—since she had seen its owners, before the General fell ill, and they all went abroad; but nevertheless she was glad to know that they had come back.

"And Mr. Warde is coming to dinner,"—so Mrs. North sighed again the next morning, as she sat down with her work at the table in the front parlour, which lay on the opposite side of the passage from the kitchen, and was especially appropriated to her; for her father-in-law said he hated to have a woman rustling about the room.

"It fidgets me to death," said the hasty old gentleman; and so he had his way, and for the most part they left him to himself.

As to Christina, it did not much matter to her

whether Mr. Warde came or stayed away. The sun had long ago melted the hoar-frost from off the grass, and everything was still and bright; even the heath was less desolate-looking in the morning sunshine, and for the first time Christina noticed the light green veil which Spring had thrown over the trees of the Park.

"Did you see the lights in the windows last night?" she said, without noticing her mother's sigh. "The windows were all lighted up; they must have come back to the Park, I suppose. Did you not see the lights?"

"Yes, they have come back; but what does it matter?" said Mrs. North, with a melancholy indifference which seemed strange to Christina. "The old man, the father I mean, is dead at last, and so they have come back—Captain Cleasby and his sister—some one told me yesterday. Ah! Christina, how different it was when that was our home! Who would have foretold our coming down to this? It seemed all so secure and certain then."

"I don't remember it, at least hardly at all—not at all clearly—but I remember young Mr. Cleasby very well," said Christina. "He gave me a ride on his pony one day, and grandpapa was so angry when I told him about it. I was quite a little girl, but I remember it very well."

"They call him Captain Cleasby now, though I believe he has left the army," said the mother. "Well, we have nothing to do with them, or with the Park; they are not even our tenants."

It was natural enough, poor woman, that she should sigh again as she took up her work. It was true that they had nothing to do either with the Park or with the Cleasbys, or with anything rich, or prosperous, or happy; but it was also quite natural that Christina, who was not faded, nor disappointed, nor tired, but, on the contrary, full of life and spirit, should not feel all this as her mother felt it.

"I shall go and tell grandpapa," she said; and before her mother could remonstrate, she had crossed the passage and knocked at the study door.

"Grandpapa," she exclaimed, as he put down his book, disturbed by her sudden entrance, and looked at her over his spectacles with more surprise than pleasure; "grandpapa, do you know the Cleasbys have come back?"

"No, I did not know it," said Mr. North. He was not indifferent, like her mother; on the contrary, he laid aside his book altogether, as if it had no longer any interest for him, and sank back wearily in his chair, almost as if he had received a shock.

"The old man is dead, grandpapa, and his son and daughter have come back. We saw the lights in the windows, and we think they have come to stay."

"So Cleasby is dead!" said the old man. "I wonder why I am alive!" For a moment there was a plaintive surprise in his voice, and then it changed into a tone of irritation. "Why do you come to tell me about it, Christina? I am an old man; I came here to be quiet, and not to be troubled about my neighbours. What does it signify to me? I remember nothing about them."

"*I* remember quite well," said Christina, under her breath; and she smiled to herself a little as she said it, and then she raised her voice and added, "and it does signify, for perhaps they may come to see us."

Mr. North laid his hands upon the arms of his chair, and slowly rose up to his full height before he answered, while Christina stood looking at him, wondering and curious.

"They will not come here," said her grandfather; and his voice, still powerful at times, resounded in the little room. "I will have nothing to do with them. They will not come here. Is it not enough" —he went on, gathering his breath by a painful effort, and locking his hands together behind his back,—"is it not enough that they are living in what should still be my house, dining at my table, shutting my doors upon me; and shall I invite them to come and see how I am changed, how everything is changed? They have what was once mine; but as to my acquaintance, they neither want it, nor shall they have it."

Then, as if putting a force upon himself, he sat down again in his chair and took his book, though he could not see the letters. "Go, Christina, go; you interrupt me," he said, with something of the former sharpness in his tone: and Christina went. It was strange that this return, to her so welcome and exciting, should be indifferent to her mother, and stranger still that it should awaken an amount of emotion in her grandfather which she was altogether unable to comprehend. To her the future was all in all, and no ghosts rose up from the past to frighten or perplex her.

It was of the future that she was dreaming, as she sat at dinner that evening, and the little conversation of trivialities, her grandfather's courtesy, her mother's laments, and the Rector's rather stern common sense made no impression upon her, until she was roused to sudden interest by a casual reference to the once more inhabited Park.

"We need some one to take an interest in the parish," Mr. Warde was saying; "but what can

you expect of a young man brought up on the Continent? Still I do not despair: there may be some good to be got out of him." After ten years of hard work as a parish priest, Mr. Warde still took a cheerful view of human nature, and was not easily discouraged.

They were a strangely incongruous party,—gathered round the same table, yet mentally how far apart! The old man smothering his pride and bitterness and sense of injury under his courteous and dignified exterior; the widow, for whom life had no longer any hopes or fears, or pressing anxieties—nothing but the recollection of a youth ending in disappointment; the Rector, in the prime of life and strength, putting his whole mind to grasp the present and grapple with the difficulties of the moment; and, lastly, the young girl, standing, as it were, upon the threshold of the world, and stretching out eager hands towards the coming years.

She looked up now, roused by the Rector's words, and saw with a return of her former wonder,

that her grandfather's forehead contracted involuntarily for a moment, and that he made an effort to listen patiently. But Mr. Warde was not an observant man, and he did not notice it.

"I suppose I need not hesitate to ask them for money," he said; "a man who can afford to keep up that place ought to be ready to do something for the parish. I think I have a right to expect it, and I need it much. I am not begging now, though, and I know, sir, you have done all you can."

"Yes, I have," said Mr. North, shortly. The Rector was a simple, kindly, straightforward man, but he was not sensitive, nor keenly alive to other people's sensibilities. Mr. North was poor, and he had done all he could, and all Mr. Warde expected of him. Why should he hesitate to say so? and why should it not be spoken of openly? But the acknowledgment was bitter to the old man. He could do nothing more, and he knew it well enough: but why should he be told so plainly that it was to young Cleasby and not to him that the Rector looked

for support? What right had he to speak to him at all upon such a subject? So Mr. North thought; but the thought did not make him less courteous and hospitable in his manner, for Mr. Warde was his guest, and was to be treated with all deference. Nevertheless it rankled; and there was another reason which put a restraint upon their friendly intercourse, and deprived it of the cordiality which would have been most congenial to the Rector. The White House belonged to Mr. Warde, and had originally been intended for a parsonage, but Mr. Warde was unmarried, and lived in tiny apartments over the baker's, so he had let the house to the Norths, partly because he was glad to get rid of it with its long passages and big fireplaces, which were not adapted for bachelor comfort, and partly because it was a time when Mr. North was in trouble, and glad to find a house for which he was not required to pay down money at once; so they stood in relation of tenant and landlord, a relation which was galling to Mr. North's feelings, and which threw a deeper

shade of formality over his manner to the clergyman, though, in his way, he both liked and respected him.

"Are you going to call at the Park?" asked Mr. Warde, in his direct matter-of-fact way, with no suspicion of the conflict which he was raising up in his host's mind between his offended dignity and his courtesy.

And then both the women looked and waited for the answer; but while Christina's eyes were opened wide and fixed upon her grandfather, Mrs. North's were cast down and fixed upon the table-cloth.

"Why should I call?" said Mr. North. "No, I do not intend calling. Quiet, absolute quiet, is what suits me best in my old age; and I am not prepared to make new acquaintances. I am not good company for the rising generation."

Mr. Warde was still a young man in Mr. North's eyes, though he was thirty-five, or perhaps a little older; and though he knew that his host spoke with contempt of the rising generation when he said that

he was not good company for them, he never thought of taking exception at anything Mr. North might say; indeed, he was a man that it was difficult for anyone to offend.

"I cannot help thinking it would be better for you if you saw more of your neighbours," he said, as usual giving free expression to his thoughts; and although perhaps his advice was uncalled for in addressing a man so much his senior, it was not given with any arrogance or priestly superiority, but rather as the frank opinion of one unused to keep his sentiments to himself; nevertheless Mr. North, as might have been expected, was not pleased with the interference.

"Of that I must be the best judge," he said: and then he looked at his daughter-in-law in a way to intimate that it was time for her to leave the room.

For the time the subject was laid aside; but when, the long sitting over, the wine was ended, and the clergyman came into the front parlour, where

Christina and her mother were sitting at work, it came into their talk, for Mr. North had gone into his study for a book.

"Why do you not persuade him to exert himself?" asked the Rector. "It would be better for him and for you all. He should not shut himself up as he does."

"It suits him," said Christina; and though she sighed at the incomprehensibleness of such a taste, she added, "I suppose he has a right to do as he pleases;" for Christina allowed no one but herself to blame her grandfather.

"Certainly not; we have all our duties to ourselves and to each other," said the clergyman: and this time there was something a little clerical in his tone which made Christina feel rebellious, and prompted her to answer, that "as to everyone having duties, it might be so, but she had never found hers out."

"Then you have never tried," said Mr. Warde: and soon after he went away to his night school.

And although Christina did not care for his opinion, she knew that he spoke sincerely. "He does not approve of me," she said to herself; "and though it does not matter, I dare say he is right, after all!"

CHAPTER III.

FOR some days it seemed as if Mrs. North was quite right when she said that the Cleasbys' return could make no difference to them : the days passed as they had passed before, and the only witnesses to their existence were the lights which shone from their windows through the Park trees. Christina could not have told why, but every night she looked out at them before going to bed, and every night they seemed a little farther off; sometimes she thought she would cease to see them at all, and yet she looked, and wondered, and waited.

One day the gates were opened, and some one drove past in a dogcart, but she did not see who it was, and she even began to think that she did not

care to know. The heath was only divided from the trees of the Park by the winding stony road; but it was a barrier which could not be passed by her—so Christina thought; and after all it did not so much matter.

One afternoon she was sitting with her grandfather in the study, writing from his dictation a criticism upon a book he had been reading. "It is well to note down one's thoughts," he had said in his didactic way, and Christina had taken out pen and paper with a mental wonder that he should care to preserve what no one would ever care to know. Indeed, she wondered how he could find it worth while to think about such things at all; but of course this she did not say.

It was growing dusk, and the one candle gave but a feeble light; so she was kneeling by the table to catch the firelight upon her page; but the old man was long in collecting his thoughts, and it was only at intervals that he spoke, and Christina's eyes had wandered out into the darkness outside the window,

and her thoughts were weaving themselves into a vague dream. Then suddenly, when all seemed most peaceful and ordinary; when the doors had, as it were, been shut upon the outer world; when even Bernard was not to be expected; when her mother was, as usual, working in the little parlour at the other side of the passage, and Janet was in the kitchen, and she and her grandfather were alone, he with pain and effort shaping his thoughts into words, she letting hers wander into a dreamland which had nothing definite about it,—at this moment, of all others, when the world seemed farthest off, the calm was broken by a citizen of that world.

He came as if his visit were the most commonplace thing in life, asked Janet, with easy indifference, if her master were in, and followed her so closely along the passage that she had no opportunity to give warning of his advent, but had barely time to open the door and announce "Captain Cleasby," before he stood within the room.

He did not feel embarrassed, nor as if his visit had

anything of special import in it; he did not feel that he was dining at Mr. North's table every night, but, on the contrary, looked on that table as most peculiarly his own; and he had come to see Mr. North as a near neighbour, and an old acquaintance of his father's, without any thought of the circumstances which might make his visit a painful one; but yet he did not advance for a moment, not because he felt doubtful or shy, but because in the uncertain light he could not see clearly in whose presence he stood.

There was a pause, and Christina rose up hastily from her knees, suddenly awakened from her dreams, and flushed at the unexpectedness of the entrance, and drew back a little and looked curiously at the stranger. Then Mr. North made an effort to rise, and yet he did not, and he knew that the young man had seen the effort when he came forward and held out his hand.

"Pray don't disturb yourself," he said, as he advanced into the light, and shook hands with Mr.

North, and then for the first time saw Christina and bowed to her. "I hope I am not interrupting anything; I must apologize for calling so late, but I have been out all day. I hope I am not interrupting you."

Christina was sitting quite in the shadow. Even the outline of her figure was undefined; but a little soft low laugh came out of the darkness as Captain Cleasby ended his apology, and a voice which seemed as if speaking to itself, "I think we can forgive the interruption."

"It is of no consequence," said Mr. North—and his tone was very stately—"my time is quite at your service."

Perhaps the magnificence of the speech was thrown away upon Captain Cleasby, who was not thinking of Geoffrey North as the man to whom the Park had belonged, but rather of his father's friend, who, poor old fellow, was sadly aged and altered. He had too much tact to betray this, or show any sense of the change. He drew forward a chair and sat down

before the fire, and began to talk with a lazy ease which was new to Christina.

"I cannot expect you to remember me, sir," he said; "I was quite a boy: but I remember you well, and everything about the place. We have been moving about ever since."

"You have been on the Continent, I understand," said Mr. North, stiffly.

"Yes, at one place or another. We are a migratory people, but at last we have come home."

He did not say it as if he were glad to be once more at the Park; and though he called it "home," there was ever so slight a touch of contempt in his voice.

It seemed as if Mr. North gathered up his breath to speak, and yet the remark he made was a difficult one for a stranger to answer.

"I was surprised and grieved to hear of Cleasby's death," he said.

It was only a month since it had happened, and all the agitations and incidents of the time were fresh

in the young man's memory. After all, long habit and daily intercourse had created an affection which, though it had nothing in it of elevated sentiment or respect, had yet been that of a son for a father; and Mr. North's observation brought a shadow and a change over his face.

"Thank you," he said briefly. Then there was a silence, and again it was apparent to Christina that her grandfather made an effort to break it.

"Are you going to become a resident at the Park?" he said.

"I hardly know, myself—we are very uncertain; but I daresay we shall be here for some time to come. It is only myself and my sister."

"You prefer the Continent?"

"Well, we know very little of English life as yet; of course it is rather strange to us at first, but I dare say we shall settle down in time."

He thought for a moment whether he should add anything more cordial, as would have seemed natural in speaking to his nearest neighbour and to his

father's old friend; whether he should say anything of future intercourse, or ask whether he had any belonging who would care for his fishing or shooting; but the chilling dignity of Mr. North's manner had repelled him, and soon after he took his leave. Christina had been in the background and dim shadow in the dusky twilight, and he had hardly noticed her, but he had been in the circle of firelight, and she had seen him clearly. Was it an omen of the future?

Well, after all he had crossed the road; the barrier which she thought impassable had been passed, but all the same she was further off than ever, and she felt it. There was no bond of union, his life had been so different from theirs, and what could they say to him? It was not so strange that Mr. North should find a difficulty in opening and sustaining a conversation, and Christina no longer wondered at his embarrassment, nor at his decision that the Cleasbys should not come to his house. It was quite true that they had nothing to do with them,

that they had nothing in common with prosperity, riches, and people of the world; their way of thinking, their talk, their very manner was different: and Christina sighed a little as she leant back in her chair.

Her grandfather had forgotten his book, and he too leant back in his chair, lost in thought.

"Oh, Christina!" said her mother, "what are you doing there? And did Captain Cleasby find you like this, with only one candle, and the room all in disorder, and you in that old blue gown? Oh, dear! why did he come, and no one expecting him?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Christina; "but as to the room and my gown, I don't suppose that he even saw them:" and she laughed a little at the idea. It had never occurred to her to consider what Captain Cleasby would have thought of them or their surroundings, and perhaps she was too proud to have given a thought to her gown; for she, like her grandfather, was proud in her way.

"You may laugh, Christina; I daresay it is very

amusing to you," said the mother, in the aggrieved tone which had become habitual to her; "but I don't see anything to laugh at, for my part. You cannot remember, of course, and so you don't feel the difference; but when I think what it used to be, and how changed it all is now——"

"Oh, dear me!" said Christina, with a kind of sad impatience: and she got up from her chair and went to the window, and stood looking out at the mist in which the heath was shrouded, through which not even the lights from the house on the hill could be seen.

It was quite true that she did not, as her mother said, "feel the difference;" she had been used to isolation and poverty nearly all her life, and she had no recollection of brighter days; but yet the lonely dreariness of the life they were leading was far more oppressive to her than to Mrs. North, who at least had nothing more to expect.

She leant up against the window and drew a long breath, as if she could rid herself in that physical

way of the depression which was creeping over her, and turned her back upon her grandfather, who still sat meditating in his chair, and upon her mother, who had taken up her work and was bending over it.

But, after all, Christina was young and strong and full of life; and though at times she might review her fate and let despondency conquer her, very often she forgot it altogether in the spring and sunshine, and the natural freshness of youth. Every day the west wind blew more softly, every day the tints grew deeper over the Park trees, and April rains had watered the brown heath and made the scanty herbage green, and the birds began to sing and the gummy chestnut buds to glisten, and the winter was over; and though Christina might be lonely, and at times sad and rebellious, she had not yet shut her heart to the influences of the opening year. Her mood softened, and she was gracious to Bernard, and promised to go and see his mother.

It was no penance to her; there was no one for

whom she had so great a respect as her aunt, but she did not go often to see her. She hardly knew herself why she did not seek her more. It was not that she was afraid, for she was afraid of no one, and it was not for want of time or opportunity; perhaps it was because she knew Mrs. Oswestry did not always approve of her. She was not a woman who expressed an unfavourable opinion readily, neither was she critical; but she was essentially just, impartial, and firm; and for some reason or other, she did not, as people say, get on with Christina, who, to be sure, was destitute of many valuable qualities. The expression of Mrs. Oswestry's face was kindly and strong and serene; a face that could not deceive, and could at times soften into tenderness, but withal giving evidence of a calm, well-regulated mind, and a ruling spirit. This was perhaps the reason that Christina set out to see her with no vivid anticipation of pleasure, but rather with the sense that she was discharging a duty.

Yet she felt courageous also, and the morning air had given her a spirit of enterprise, and she had said to Bernard the evening before, "I shall tell Aunt Margaret that some day I am coming to live at the Homestead;" and she thought that she would do it, and pictured to herself the surprise which she was going to awaken as she walked across the heath to her aunt's house.

"Am I come too early, Aunt Margaret?" she said, as she pushed open the door and found Mrs. Oswestry giving out the linen from the cupboard in the passage.

Peace brooded over the house; peace was within, and peace without,—in the sunny garden outside, and in the pretty drawing-room. There was an atmosphere of quiet about the roses, and the bees, and the poultry in the yard. It was sheltered from the winds by the hill which rose behind it, and all was tranquil within; the first crocuses bloomed under the garden wall, or the last roses shed their leaves upon the gravel-walks.

Mrs. Oswestry was standing, a tall figure in her long black dress, among the piles of white linen, with the sweet spring air blowing in upon her from an open window, and she turned her full, steady eyes upon Christina as she came in, and held out her hands and kissed her with a smile of welcome.

"You are welcome, my dear," she said, with a touch of her father's ceremony: and then she led the way into the little drawing-room, with its pretty bay window full of flowers, the scent of them stirred by every soft gust through the window: and she sat down in her own chair and took up her work, and Christina sat down also, but did not very well know what to say.

"Had you anything particular to say to me?" said Mrs. Oswestry. She looked at Christina, who was twisting her hat about in her hands, though it was not usual with her to be at a loss for words: and then Christina felt how impossible it was for her to answer such an appeal by any confidence. It was an opening, perhaps, but an

opening of which it was quite impossible to take advantage. It would be much better to introduce the subject casually; so she put it away for the present.

"No, no, Aunt Margaret," she said, "only I thought that I would come. Bernard said I could come."

"You do not come so very often, but you are always welcome," said Mrs. Oswestry: and she smiled, for she was not a woman to reproach anyone for neglecting her. "It is not very lively here, and there is nothing to amuse you."

"I don't think of amusement," said Christina; "you would not imagine I wanted it, if you knew me better. I always like this house, it is so bright. I think you get all the sunshine up here, Aunt Margaret."

"Do we?" said Mrs. Oswestry. "Yes, I think that you are right as to the sunshine, but I hope that we do not quite monopolize it."

Christina did not answer, but she leant her

chin upon her hand, and looked out through the framework of creepers which clustered round the window.

"Christina," said her aunt, after a little pause, "I sometimes think that you do not make the most of what comes to you."

Christina coloured a little, and turned her eyes upon Mrs. Oswestry, and upon the instant took up arms.

"I don't know what you mean, Aunt Margaret. I suppose we are not like other people exactly; but I don't see how I can make the most of what I have not got. You can see for yourself that we are not spoilt by pleasures, and except that, I don't see how you can know about it; only I suppose Bernard——"

"Bernard has nothing to do with what I am saying," said her aunt, interrupting her. "I speak from my own observation, and for your good, Christina."

"I speak to Bernard sometimes, I know," said Christina quickly, not noticing the interruption, "and

tell him things, because I have no one else to speak to; but if he makes other people blame me——"

"Oh, Christina, my dear child," said her aunt; "oh, Christina, why do you pretend to think it is Bernard? You know well enough he never blames you."

Christina hung her head and coloured again, and a sudden smile flitted across her face. She knew it, of course, quite well; but no one, not even Bernard himself, had ever put it to her so plainly before. Then she lifted up her head, and, moved by a yearning and an impulse to seek for sympathy, was about to make her confession and give her confidence, had not Mrs. Oswestry gone on without giving her time to answer.

"I am not speaking as Bernard's deputy, and I will not say that his thoughts always agree with mine, though I believe that he hides nothing from me," said his mother: and she spoke with the proud confidence of a woman who has yet to learn that she does not hold the first place in her son's heart. Mrs. Oswestry was a just and impartial woman, but

yet the first knowledge would have been bitter to her, and Christina could not tell her that it was so. She looked round again at the room, at the muslin curtains blowing in the wind, at the creepers outside, and the glass of spring flowers on the rose-wood work-table, and all the trivialities which make a house a home, and she sighed again as she thought of the contrast.

"It is all very different with us," she said.

Yet Mrs. Oswestry's drawing-room was not luxurious, nor even very orderly. There was a drugget on the floor, and the mirror over the mantelpiece was small, and the chintz had seen better days, and Bernard's compasses and rules and drawing materials were littered about on one of the tables; but yet it had the unmistakable air of a room to which people come for rest and cheerfulness and domestic peace; and this was a look quite unknown to the rooms at the White House.

Christina went over to the table where Bernard's drawings were strewn about, and began to turn them

over; not because she cared much about them, but because she was a little ashamed of her last speech, to which her aunt had made no response, and she was glad to change the subject.

"What is Bernard doing? where is he gone?" she asked: and the elder woman, who could not, of course, read her thoughts, imagined that there was embarrassment in her voice. But she was wrong, for Christina could speak quite openly of her cousin; and if she spoke less frankly than usual, it was not upon his account, but because she was dissatisfied with her visit and vexed with herself.

"Bernard is gone to Overton; he is drawing some plans for the new church, but if you can stay, he will be back by tea-time, and then he can walk home with you," said her aunt.

She did not approve of Christina; she did not altogether like her; but if her boy had set his heart upon it, she would not stand in his way; and if it were to be, it had better be done openly, and with everyone's knowledge.

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And then Christina's heart smote her, partly for her own reticence, partly for the confidence shown in her. Would it be so, she wondered, if her aunt knew of what had been between them? She almost wished that it had never been, but his words could not be forgotten: she had told him she might change, but she knew that he at least was pledged for ever.

"No, I cannot wait for Bernard," she said; "I must go home, but thank you all the same, Aunt Margaret:" and she went over and kissed her aunt with sudden compunction.

After that they went out together, and fed the poultry, and looked at the hives, and nailed up some straggling creepers; and gradually, standing in that peaceful atmosphere, looking up into the serenity of Mrs. Oswestry's face, Christina felt the spirit of the place creeping over her, charming away her longings, and filling her with the contentment of rest. After all, what could she desire more? One day this would be her home.

CHAPTER IV.

ALTHOUGH it was so early in the year, the sun was still in the south when Christina turned homewards, with that feeling of calm contentment and rest, the predominant one within her; and the Homestead she was leaving behind her still stood forth in her mind as the end to be desired.

A sort of vague satisfaction filled her as she made her way back across the heath more slowly than she had come, no longer quickened by the sense of enterprise and exhilaration with which she had set out. She was not now thinking of the future as comprehending anything new or unaccustomed, and she started a little when she came to the entrance of the wood, and suddenly lifting

her eyes saw Captain Cleasby coming towards her, ready to open the gate.

She was not exactly shy, for it was not usual with her, and in point of fact there was nothing to cause her embarrassment, only she was curious to know if he would recognize her again, it had been so dark when he called, and she had been so much in the background.

It was a very lonely spot, a little wood in a hollow between two ridges of moorland, where hyacinths and anemones mixed themselves with the tangled undergrowth.

Christina stood still, doubtful one moment, and then Captain Cleasby lifted his hat and put his hand on the gate. He was coming through the wood with his dogs at his heels, and as Christina stepped forward one of them snarled and showed his teeth. His master struck him with his cane and made his apologies, and then he recognized Christina and claimed her acquaintance.

"It was so dark the other evening, I did not

suppose that you would know me again," she said.

"I am not thinking of the other day," he answered, smiling; "but I think I should have known you again, although you were such a little girl when I saw you last!" and such a pretty little girl, he thought to himself,—but he did not say it.

"Yes, I remember," said Christina, and she too smiled as he turned back to walk with her.

"I wonder that you can remember," he said; "it is such years and years ago—ten or eleven years. I should think I must have been about sixteen."

"Yes, you gave me a ride on your pony," said Christina: "I remember it quite well, but then I have not had many things to remember in my life."

Captain Cleasby smiled again somewhat compassionately, thinking of the dreary house and the dusky room, and the old man sitting there in his solitude, but he made no direct answer.

"I hardly know whether my visit was welcome to your grandfather," he said; "it is so long since

he saw me, and I ought to have remembered there were painful associations. I was sorry to find him so much aged. But I hope my living at the Park does not make him look upon me as a natural enemy."

Christina paused for a moment. Captain Cleasby was a stranger, though she had said she remembered him, and she hesitated as to what she should say or leave unsaid; but somehow she felt a persuasion that he would not take advantage of any admission that she might make.

"Grandpapa is very much changed," she said, "and he does not like to see strangers, or even his old friends; and I daresay he does not like to be reminded of old times," said Christina, candidly.

As for Captain Cleasby, her straightforward answer took him by surprise, certainly; but he was only a little interested by a candour to which he was unaccustomed.

"I understand," he said, "and I remind him of old times. But I hope you have not all the same

feeling. Do you too look upon me as a natural enemy?"

"Oh no," said Christina, turning her frank eyes upon him; "no,—why should I? It matters nothing to me."

"Then we part in peace," said Captain Cleasby, for they had come to the gate of the White House, and Christina's mother was standing in the window looking out.

Then he turned back along the way he had come with her, whistling to his dogs.

"Who was with you, Christina?" said Mrs. North, anxiously, as she came lightly up the garden path, and, opening the parlour door, stood before her, making a spot of light, as it were, in the dingy atmosphere, with her cheeks a little flushed by her walk, her eyes shining, and a smile still hovering round her mouth.

"It was Captain Cleasby; he met me in the Hollow," said Christina. She was not exactly elated, but she felt as if a break had been discovered in the

hills which bounded her horizon, and a new vista opened to her view.

"Your grandfather does not wish to see him here," said Mrs. North, who generally sheltered herself under his name when she thought she was about to thwart Christina; "we have nothing to do with him; he is quite different from us; it is not as it used to be!"

"I suppose he is different, but people can be friends all the same," said Christina; "he does not want to avoid us. And as to being different, we are just what we were always; we are just as much worth knowing as when we lived at the Park. I am sure I wish we never had lived there," she added, with a little shrug of her shoulders.

"You don't know what you say," said the mother, "and it is hard-hearted of you to talk in that way; but you can understand that Captain Cleasby is not wanted here; and I think if I were you I would not say anything to your grandfather; he does not like to hear of the Cleasbys."

"I know," said Christina: and she went away

after that, and did not say anything about Captain Cleasby's hope that they did not all look upon him as a natural enemy; but she remembered it, nevertheless, perhaps the more, that she did not speak of it.

It was just at this time that Mrs. Oswestry was called away to nurse a cousin who was sick and lonely, and Bernard came to stay at the White House, for a "little company," as his aunt said; for the Homestead was shut up, and only a man and a maid left to take care of it. It was a change which some people would have looked upon as anything but cheerful, from the sunny hillside,

> "That woodbined cottage, girt with orchard trees,
> Last left and earliest found of birds and bees,"

to the White House on the heath; but Bernard had his reasons, and came readily enough.

"I wonder you come," Christina had said.

"Do you?" he answered; and then something in his manner had made her stop, and recalled her to

herself; she coloured a little, though she turned away quickly and pretended not to see it.

After all it did make a wonderful difference in her life. He was working hard, and he was not much at home, but still his presence brought light and warmth and colour into her life. In the early mornings, coming in to breakfast fresh from bathing in the river, his fair hair still hanging damp about his face, rushing up the stairs, clattering along the passages, striding across the heath, whistling to himself as he drew his plans; even when he sat over his book in the evening his sunshiny presence made itself felt, and Christina sometimes found herself breaking into sudden unaccustomed laughter, from the very contagion of his boyish light-heartedness.

These were happy days, when in spirit they could still go back to their childhood and almost realize its dreams. They were days for Bernard without one cloud or presentiment of evil; and as for Christina, she was happy in the present, and took no thought for the future.

Captain Cleasby was away, and his sister was in deep mourning, and had not been seen except in church, so there were no interruptions or agitations from without.

If life could always go on as smoothly and easily and thoughtlessly, it would not be hard to look for nothing else. And the hedges were white with hawthorn blossoms, and the cuckoos were calling among the Park trees, and spring was blossoming into summer; and was it wonderful that Christina too should leave the winter behind her, and forget that it had ever been? It was a time of almost childish happiness whilst it lasted; and though it was shortly to depart, how could she know that it would not come back? Bernard was going away, certainly, but it was not for always. She should miss him, but she could look forward to his return, and he would not take all her sunshine with him. He was going to the north, on some business connected with his profession: it would help him on, he would see more of the world, and would have something to tell when he came back.

"All the same I wish you were not going!" she said, as she walked across the heath with him on the afternoon before his departure.

He had some orders to give at the Homestead on his way into Overton; he was to leave next morning, and he had asked her to go with him. The garden required to be looked to, and she could take back some roses for her mother, so he had said; and as they turned their backs upon the White House and the stony road, he thought to himself that he was bringing her to the house where she would one day be brought as his bride.

Christina too thought of it as she sat under the elm, tying up the roses which he threw into her lap. The soft wind rustled the leaves above her head, the doves were cooing in their cage, the butterflies were flitting about among the flowers, the shadows were quivering upon the lawn, the whole air was musical with the hum of insects, and sweet with the fragrance of summer. She thought no longer that she should change, and she told him so, bringing the quick blood

to his cheek with a sudden flush, making him start and turn his eyes upon her with a look which she remembered afterwards, when the scene came again before her eyes, distinct in all its features—of the sheltered garden, and the roses, and the flickering sunlight, and Bernard standing before her with that radiance in his face which she was never again to see but in retrospect.

"You will not forget, Christina," he said; and there was a happy confidence in his voice, a belief in her which nothing could diminish or destroy.

"No," said Christina; "no, Bernard, I think not. Why should I change? There is no place to me like this. I wish you were not going away. Dear Bernard, how happy we have been!"

She sighed a little, but not as she had so often sighed, from weariness, or longing, or discontent, but simply from a regret which comes to us when we are happiest, a regret born of the joy which, like all other earthly joys, must sooner or later fade before our eyes.

The world too seemed very beautiful to Bernard, but he did not put his thoughts into words; they were happy, and was it not enough?

So they sat together under the trees, and wandered about among the roses for an hour or more of the golden afternoon, and then parted: he striding along the lanes to Overton at the rapid pace which belonged to his long limbs, and she making her way back across the heath towards her own home.

If she had ever been true to Bernard, she was true to him now: she had no thought, as she had said, of change, or of anything else to be desired than life with him in his home, where storms and tempests could not penetrate; where all was peace and rest and love; where they should always be as happy as they had been to-day; where she should be safe from the world and from herself.

The calmness of the afternoon had stilled her, and she lingered with that indifference to the lapse of time which belongs to happiness. Slowly she made her way amongst the yellow gorse, although the sun

was sinking behind the hill, and the sunset lights were glowing in the west. Slowly she came along the narrow path, but immediately in the direction of the path she caught sight of a figure lying in the heather; and though she was thinking of other things, and the figure was still a long way off, she knew quite well that it could be no one else than Captain Cleasby.

He was lying with his elbow resting on the ground, and his chin propped up on his hand; his little terrier lay at his side, and he had a book spread open on the heather before him. He was quite close to the path, so that Christina's dress would have almost touched him as she passed; but it was not until she was quite close that he was conscious of her, and sprang up hastily from his lair.

"A thousand pardons," he said; "I thought no one ever came here. Are you on your way home? Ah, what lovely roses!"

"They come from my aunt's garden," said Christina; "they don't grow well at the White House."

"You have been to see your aunt? how virtuous!" said Captain Cleasby. "It is a social duty which has no recompense unless she has quarrelled with all her nearer relations. I have been doing my duty too, pursuing my studies in solitude, and now I have my reward:" and he put his book into his pocket and took up his cap and walked on with Christina, as if it were a proceeding to which no one could have taken exception.

He was quite right as far as Christina was concerned; her grandfather did not like her to speak of him, it was true; it reminded him of old times; but, as she had said, it could not matter to her, and she cared nothing about the past.

"How generously your aunt has cut her flowers!" said Captain Cleasby, looking at the long stalks and clusters of buds and fresh green shoots which had fallen a prey to Bernard's ruthless knife.

"It was not my aunt; my aunt is away," said Christina; "it was Bernard Oswestry, my cousin."

"Then Bernard Oswestry, your cousin, must be

prepared to render up his account when she comes back," said Captain Cleasby, lightly.

Bernard Oswestry, and his mother, and the White House, were all nothing to Captain Cleasby, who cared neither for Christina's belongings nor for her life and surroundings.

But Christina herself was a different matter, and in a sort of way he meant it when he said that he had had his reward. He said it carelessly, and in truth Christina paid little heed to his words; only as he talked to her she forgot for the moment the garden and the Homestead, and the peacefulness which she had left so regretfully. She thought no more of Bernard, and the visions which he had put before her had faded from her mind. It was not that consciously she compared him with Captain Cleasby and found him wanting. Captain Cleasby had not his beauty, nor his frankness, nor his sunny smile. Indeed, he was not, strictly speaking, a handsome man at all; he was almost too slight, and there was no glow of health or ardour or impulse in his

face. But yet there was an attraction about him; if there was not beauty, there was grace, and a look of distinction which harmonized with his manner, the manner of a man who has seen the world and can afford to be indifferent to it. And all this again was very new to Christina.

"You will come and see my sister, I hope," he was saying. "She sees no one now, but she will be glad to see you if you will come some day. She should come to you, only you know there are objections:" and he remembered his own reception, and smiled at the recollection; for, to be sure, that moment, so full of painful embarrassment to Mr. North and of interest to Christina, was nothing to him but a trifling incident, and not even a very amusing one.

"Some day, perhaps," said Christina: and she hesitated, remembering her mother's fears and her grandfather's injunctions.

"That means you will not come; but why not?" said Captain Cleasby. "Are you afraid of us? What are you afraid of?"

"I am not afraid of anything; I am not afraid at all," said Christina: and then she paused a moment before she gave her reasons. "Grandpapa might not like it, and it is different now; we have not changed, but things have changed, and you are not like us. I don't see myself that it makes any difference, but grandpapa thinks it does, and he does not like it."

"Does not like what?"

"He does not like our having anything to do with you," said Christina, distinctly; but she could not help laughing a little as she said it, and her speech had not a very deterrent effect upon Captain Cleasby, who was not angry, or hurt, or surprised, but simply a little amused.

"Now I call that very unfair. I see how it is; you *do* look upon me as a natural enemy all the time, and then shelter yourself behind your grandfather. I call that very unfair," said Captain Cleasby.

"It does not make any difference to me," said Christina; "I told you it didn't matter to me."

"Only that you will not come to my house," said Captain Cleasby; and just then they passed from the heath and came out upon the road, back into every-day life, as it were, with a carter guiding his team of horses past the White House, and the woman of the lodge standing at the Park gates, and Mr. Warde coming towards them with a book under his arm.

Christina felt with a sudden revulsion of feeling that the eyes of the world were upon her; and that, for perhaps the first time in her life, she was doing something which she would rather not have known, about which people might talk, while Mr. Warde would, she knew, be surprised to meet her with Captain Cleasby.

He, for his part, was quite indifferent to Christina's world, so far as he himself was concerned; but he was considerate for her, and would not allow her to be blamed or wondered at upon his account.

"Then good night," he said: and he turned into his own gates, merely taking off his hat before Mr. Warde came up with them.

CHAPTER V.

MR. WARDE met Christina with an outstretched hand and his usual cordial friendly greeting, and never gave a thought to her late companion; indeed, he was pre-occupied, and thinking of something quite different; and though his expression was as straightforward and candid as ever, there was a shadow of perplexity in it which was not customary with him.

"I have been with your grandfather," he said; "he seems very much out of spirits. If you can spare me a few minutes, I should like to have a little talk with you."

They were still some way from the house, and he turned and began to pace back slowly by her

side. It was such a sudden awakening, so rapid and complete a transition from coloured clouds to common grey sky, that Christina felt her heart sink, and had no thought or curiosity about what he might be going to say. Only it would be pleasant to be free to think, and not attend to anyone's conversation.

"Your grandfather is very low," said Mr. Warde again; "I cannot help thinking that he has something upon his mind, and it has occurred to me that it may possibly be something connected with his money matters."

"Very likely," said Christina, despondingly; "we are always in difficulties." It was not a complaint, but a simple statement of a fact which she did not at that moment care to take the trouble to conceal.

"Very well," said Mr. Warde, cheerfully; "I thought it might possibly be the case. It does not matter when people are young, unless they have others dependent on them," said the Rector, who was as far from pitying Christina as she was

from making any complaint. "But when a man comes to your grandfather's time of life, it is a different thing; and what I wanted to say to you was this. I have no one dependent upon me, except my parishioners, who get a great deal more than is good for them, as a rule; and as long as I am as I am now, I should like your grandfather to look upon the White House as his. If I married, it would be another thing."

He made his proposal in a perfectly unconcerned matter-of-fact tone; and, to say the truth, Christina, who was not sensitive, but almost as simple and straightforward as Mr. Warde himself, was neither overwhelmed with surprise nor gratitude, but looked on the offer as a natural one enough, which, had it rested with her, she would not have hesitated to accept. But it rested with her grandfather, and not with her; and she said so.

"It is very kind of you, Mr. Warde," she said. "Of course it would be a great help to us, and a very great advantage. If it were me, I should

accept and be thankful; but grandpapa is different. He cannot bear to take favours; I suppose he never was accustomed to it. I sometimes think he would rather starve than ask anyone for a penny. *I* think it would be much better to take as freely as one would give; but then, you see, it does not concern me, and grandpapa is so *very* different from me," said Christina, with a sort of regretful wonder.

"Why are you all to suffer because Mr. North is prejudiced? But I think you make a mistake," said the clergyman. "I cannot quite fancy myself begging of anyone, but this is such a rational thing. I don't want the rent, and Mr. North wants the money. I offer it gladly. Why should he not accept?"

"I don't know, I am sure," said Christina; "but I do not believe that he will. People are different, you know."

"What I want you to do is to make the proposition," said the Rector; "put it to him as I

have put it to you, and then let me know the result. Don't hurry him: his first impulse will be to refuse, which is the reason that I do not go straight to him. Good night, Christina," said Mr. Warde, who considered himself privileged by his age and long acquaintance to address her by her Christian name; and then he shook hands and turned away as they reached the White House, making his way back at his energetic rapid pace to his little lodgings over the baker's at Overton.

Christina walked slowly up the garden, with a curious sense of incongruity. It was not that she was surprised at Mr. Warde's proposal, or that she was in any way embarrassed by it; it was simply that all those every-day affairs had lost their importance in her eyes for the time, and she seemed all at once to be living two lives; and though the one was pressed upon her from without, the other, which her imagination created, seemed much the more real of the two. She went up to her own room, and stood for a long time at her window,

watching the light dying out in the west, as gradually the level rays which lay across the heath faded, and the evening mists rose up from the valley. But yet she was not consciously thinking of it, nor of anything; only she smiled to herself as she looked, and forgot that it was past her grandfather's dinner-hour, and that he was impatient of being kept waiting. She was not recalled to the present by the bell, nor by the clock striking in the hall, and it was not until she heard Bernard's voice at her door that she turned, suddenly awakened from her dreams.

"Make haste, Christina," he was saying; "they are waiting; are you not coming?"

"Yes, yes," said Christina impatiently: and she did make haste, but yet she was late, and her mother sighed, and her grandfather maintained a displeased silence, and she would not apologize or feel sorry, but took her work in the evening, and would not lift her eyes from it even to speak to Bernard, who sat at his drawing, wondering at the change.

"Have you given orders about breakfast, Christina?" said Mrs. North, as she wished her good night; "he must be off by five o'clock, or half-past at the latest, he says."

"He! who?" said Christina, for she had quite forgotten that it was Bernard's last evening; but Bernard had not heard the question.

"What are you thinking about? I wish you would attend when I speak," said her mother; "I am telling you that Bernard must start at five o'clock to-morrow."

"Oh yes," said Christina, and, in spite of her ill-humour and pre-occupation, a reproachful pang shot through her; "yes, of course I will tell Janet, but I shall be down myself."

"Yes, do, Christina," said Bernard, catching her words; and Christina could not help nodding her assent gaily. If he had been sentimental or exacting, it might have been different; then she would have been forced to take it more gravely, and to face the question, and would consequently have been

troubled and vexed; but he was so boyish, so happy and lighthearted, so unsuspicious and confident, that she ceased to ask herself upon what his confidence was founded. She was not so very sorry now that he was going away; but yet they had been happy, and she would please him by being down to see him off. So she thought that evening; and when she came down in the freshness and beauty of the early summer morning, her thoughts were the same, only now the other and alien impressions of the day before were less strong than they had been, and she was more drawn towards her cousin when she began to realize how much she would lose by his departure. All the cares had been lightened by his presence, she could hardly tell why or how. He was not full of advice, or resources, or expedients; he was not even very clever, or talkative, or agreeable; but Christina could give free vent to her moods before him, and he never jarred upon her, but gave her all the mirth and gladness which she ever knew—a

gladness which, like that of childhood, was spontaneous and even unreasonable, but which had no pain or excitement intermingled with it.

Bernard was not even sad, still less desponding, on this morning of his departure; on the contrary, he was full hope, enterprise, and a happy confidence in Christina which could not be disturbed. He knew well enough that he must wait, but for him the waiting had nothing that threatened the failure of realization; and they were both young; and though his mother might not approve now, it would be different when he was older and prospering in his profession; and for the present he had no fears, and was hungry, and quite able to attend to his breakfast.

The sun was dispersing the mist which had hung over the heath, and was shining upon the old silver coffee-pot and china cups; and the breeze, full of the freshness and fragrance of the dawning day, was blowing in at the window, and they were as carelessly happy as when they had made feasts

as little boy and girl under the Park trees, with acorns for cups and saucers, and a dock-leaf for a table-cloth.

"When we are married,"—said Bernard. He had been talking of his plans and hopes and projects, and came back, as was natural, to the one idea in which they centred.

Christina started, and put down her cup hastily, and pushed her chair back from the table.

"Yes, when;—but that is a long way off, Bernard. Why should we think about it now? Perhaps it may never be. We cannot marry upon nothing at all, you know, and how could grandpapa give me anything; how could I ask it? Perhaps it would be better if we did not think about it."

"Not think about it!" said Bernard. A sudden flush as of anger or pain came over his face, and he put his arms upon the table and leant over and stared at her. "I have thought about it ever since I can remember," he said, very slowly, with none of his usual ardour or impetuosity.

"Yes, I know," said Christina: and she could not tell why, but sudden tears rose in her eyes. And then there was a silence, and in spirit they both went back to days of summer and winter and early spring, and then to that day when she first knew that he had thought about it, when he had asked and she had not denied him, and now he must ask another question, and would not shrink from it.

"Christina," he said, "you remember, of course you remember your promise; but if you wish it, I give it you back again. It is better to say it now, if it is to be. If you have changed, say so, and be free if you like."

"I have not changed," said Christina; "there is no change that I know of, only one learns to think that what is distant must be doubtful:" and though the tears were still in her eyes, she smiled as she looked at him. He was pale now, and his mouth was set, and his eyes full of a fierce longing, but he was still a boy, and beautiful in his youth and innocence.

"It is only that it is so far off," said Christina; "I

remember, of course, and it is the same as it was then: I have not forgotten—I shall not forget you."

"That is a promise, and *I* shall not forget," he said; and he got up rather unsteadily from his chair, and laughed in his agitation and relief.

Then Janet came in, and the dogcart was at the door, and his portmanteau was being carried out. Christina came and stood in the doorway shading her eyes with her hand from the flood of sunshine, and Bernard had rushed upstairs to wish his grandfather good-bye; she could hear him calling to him in the passage above, and then he came down the stairs, and she held out both her hands to him.

"Good-bye, Bernard," she said, smiling.

"Good-bye," he said, and kissed her, though Janet was standing close by; but then his going away was a great event, and three months was a long time, and they were cousins.

The next minute he had slammed the gate behind him, and was driving fast across the heath. Christina watched him until he was out of sight, and went back

into the house. It seemed to her now that she must be true to him, that there was no way of escape even if she had wished it, and she was not sure that she did wish it.. She would be at peace, and at rest, and free from all cares; they might be happy even now. She had met Captain Cleasby, she had walked and talked with him, but what did it amount to? They were no longer complete strangers, but that was all. She had met him frankly and simply, and had not asked herself why those two meetings stood out distinct and full of light against the dark background of her life: but in that casual meeting with Mr. Warde, in that sudden revulsion of feeling which she had had as she left the moor and entered upon the public road; even in Captain Cleasby's manner, carelessly courteous as it was, when he turned into his own gates, a sort of revelation had been made to her. She would no longer do anything which all the world might not know. Her grandfather might be prejudiced, and bitter, and unjust; but if he did not choose to see this man—if others knew,

as they no doubt did know, that Captain Cleasby was not welcome at the White House, then it was not for her to keep up any intercourse with him; and besides, she began to have a vague feeling of danger, of something which might cause a conflict in her spirit and a discord in her life, if she continued to turn her eyes towards the Park.

She might be wilful and rebellious and reckless at times, but a better spirit had come to her now. Bernard was so happy and confident, and she was touched, and would be true to her words. So she thought as she sat over her work that day, and missed his resounding step along the passage, and his boyish merriment, and his winning smile.

CHAPTER VI.

IN the agitations of the preceding day, and Bernard's departure and her own thoughts, Christina had quite forgotten the mission with which she had been charged to her grandfather, and Mr. Warde's offer had passed out of her mind. Mr. North was more irritable than usual, and her mother was restless and uneasy; but Christina sat over her work, and the day seemed long, but she forgot to ask herself the cause of her mother's uneasiness or her grandfather's ill-temper.

It was late in the afternoon when Mrs. North came into the room, looking a little anxious and excited. "Mr. Warde is in the other room," she said; "can you go to him, Christina? He says that he spoke to you last night."

"Last night? yes, of course," said Christina. "It is kind of him. I suppose he has told you; but grandfather will never consent: I know he will not."

"I cannot ask him," said Mrs. North, nervously. "I told Mr. Warde it was no use begging me to do it. He is so angry when he is contradicted, and I cannot face it. But Mr. Warde said that you did not mind."

"No, I don't mind, certainly," said Christina. It seemed strange to her that anyone should be so excited about such a commonplace matter; and she did not know what it was to be afraid of anyone. Her terrors were all imaginative, and had nothing to do with things which she could prove and touch. She got up at once and threw down her work, and went to Mr. Warde, who was waiting in the front room.

"I have been speaking to Mrs. North," he said; "but she is unwilling to go to your grandfather. Will you make my offer for me? You are not

afraid," said the Vicar, and his tone was not questioning, but affirmative.

"No, I am not afraid," said Christina: and she threw back her head and laughed a little; "but you will not be vexed, I hope, if he refuses. I know he will not give in. He would die sooner than give in." And then he took his leave, and Christina went at once to her grandfather. He sat in his arm-chair, blowing clouds of smoke out of a short thick pipe, and the occupation had soothed him; he did not reproach Christina for her entrance, but even made a sort of majestic wave with his hand to intimate that she might seat herself on the low stool opposite to him. Christina was not afraid, but neither was she conciliatory. She wished that the offer might be accepted: she would have accepted it if the decision had rested with her; but yet she was not diplomatic, and had no idea of gaining her purpose in any but the most direct manner.

"Mr. Warde has just been here," she said.

"Has he? He is always welcome. I have a

great respect for Warde," said her grandfather, and he said it as if he thought that it was a declaration which would find favour with Christina; but she was too intent upon her purpose to notice this.

"He wished me to tell you," she went on, "that he does not care about the rent of this house. He hopes that you won't think about paying it at present; as he is now, he does not care about the money."

"What!" said Mr. North, and he took his pipe out of his mouth, and leant forward in his chair. "What! not care for the money! Then, confound him, he ought to care for it. Why should I care for it more than he does? I will live upon no man's charity."

"I can't see what charity has got to do with it," said Christina; "he does not want the money, and you do."

"I do! Who told you I do? And if I did, do you think I would beg of the parson? I'd rather go on the parish at once. As to the rent, it is not due

yet; and if we do run a little short, I suppose your aunt could lend me a few pounds. It is poor work being proud when your parson comes to offer you money."

"You are very queer, grandpapa," said Christina, who got on with him better than most people, just because she took no pains to be respectful: "if it was me, I shouldn't mind."

"No, I dare say that you would not; but look here, Christina, I'm not going to have any more of this nonsense. Warde has spoken to you, and you can give him his answer. So long as you say what I mean, you can say it as you like. The fellow has no more tact than an ox, and I don't suppose that you can hurt his feelings."

"I shall certainly not try," said Christina, indignantly; "I wonder that you can feel like this, grandpapa. At any rate, *I* am very grateful, and I shall tell him so."

"Well, tell him what you like on your own account," said Mr. North: and after Christina was

gone, he sat there still, blowing out his clouds of smoke; and though he had been angry and allowed himself to fly into a passion, it was not of his passion nor of his injuries that he was thinking, but of something which had never yet disturbed him, to which he had hardly ever given a serious thought. Why was it that this offer of Mr. Warde's, joined to Christina's words, had awakened speculations as to his granddaughter's future? He wondered, as he said this, what had been the motive of the Vicar's proposal, what had roused Christina's indignation, and what she would say to him on her own account. It was not the kind of thought to which he was generally addicted, but he was proud of his granddaughter; and if it might be that Warde took an interest in her, how many crooked things would it make straight! She would be provided for, taken out of harm's way; and then it would be a different thing when he was Christina's husband; he could then do many things which he could not do for them as Rector of the parish; and

in spite of what he had said about marriage, he would still, under those circumstances, spare the rent, as Mr. North knew well. "As to Christina, she would give away her last crust if it was to do anyone any good," the old man said to himself, not without a certain pride in a generosity which had dwelt in him too before he had been cramped by his misfortunes. He was even somewhat softened by his own interpretation of the course things were taking; and when the next evening Mr. Warde came to receive his answer, and he watched him pacing up and down the level bit of heath behind the house with Christina, he called his daughter-in-law's attention to it with a pleased pride which had taken all the irritation and bitterness out of his voice.

"Look, Mary!" he said: and Mrs. North stood up and looked. It was a stormy evening: the heath was wet with rain, and red lights glowed under the heavy clouds which lay along the horizon; and though it was summer, the wind was blowing in

chilly gusts from the north. But Christina did not seem to know it; she was pacing up and down, bareheaded, talking with grave interest, if not with animation; and the clergyman, in his broad wide-awake, with his hands crossed behind his back, was evidently deep in some discussion.

"Yes, I see," said Mrs. North drearily, and took up her work again without another word.

"He may not always know what he ought to do," said Mr. North, leniently; "but he is a good fellow. Christina might do worse."

"Yes; it was true enough Christina might do worse; but her grandfather was wrong in his conjectures, and her thoughts were very far from his. To her Mr. Warde was a kind friend and counsellor, and a liberal, honest-minded man, qualified by his age and experience to help her in her practical difficulties. And his experience had not led him to distrust and doubt and fear, as her mother feared. He had seen a great deal of life during his work as a parish priest, but he was still ready

to believe in the existence and the strength of goodness, and its final triumph over evil; and this spirit was congenial to Christina.

She saw a great deal of him at this time, for he came often to the house, and he lightened the gloom of the household, silencing Mrs. North's complaints, and rousing the old man from his fits of sullen abstraction; and Christina was frankly grateful to him, and never guessed why his visits were so welcome to her grandfather and her mother: and all this time an undercurrent of uncertain happiness and excitement lay beneath this every-day exterior of monotonous routine and commonplace difficulties. Christina did not ask herself why they did not press upon her as heretofore; she did not ask herself why they had sunk into insignificance; perhaps she did not dare to ask herself questions. She did not tell herself that Captain Cleasby's visits made epochs in her life; she did not acknowledge to herself that the turns in the road, the spots on the heath where she chanced to meet him, were to be associated with

those casual meetings for ever after in her mind. And she even wondered why it was an effort to speak of these meetings to her mother. Her grandfather, though he tolerated his visits and behaved to him with courtesy, never cared to hear his name; but her mother could not feel it in the same way, and though it was an effort, Christina would speak of him and sometimes quote his words. They were words which all the world might have listened to for that matter; but nevertheless it was with a reluctance for which she could give no account to herself that she brought herself to repeat them. As for Mrs. North, she paid little heed. She thought Captain Cleasby might find something better to do with his time than strolling about the lanes, or lying upon the heather with his book, or driving into Overton as if he had not a minute to spare or was racing for a wager; but after all it was of no consequence, and, as she often told Christina, they had nothing to do with him or he with them. Perhaps it might have been otherwise if Mr. Warde had not been there to

make it all safe; but thinking, as she did, that he and Christina were of one mind, and that all would be as she desired, she saw no danger for her daughter in occasional meetings with an idle young man, who was to her thinking as far out of her reach as the "bright particular star" was out of the reach of Helena. She did not think that Christina might be in her heart a radical, and that this gulf might be a mere streamlet to her. Yet all this time Christina had kept true to her word; she had not been to Captain Cleasby's house, nor had she seen his sister. This was not his fault, but she had stood firm, and had had an unknown ally in Miss Cleasby.

"Why should I make an exception in their favour?" she had said, when he urged her going to visit the Norths. "You know I am going nowhere. I shall offend the whole neighbourhood. If I call upon the Norths, I shall be expected to call upon everyone."

"That is nonsense, Augusta; they are your nearest neighbours. Why, they live at our door. If you had not been ill and kept to the house, you must

have met them long ago. And it is not like a conventional civility; here the opportunity is given you of doing a real kindness. If you had seen the old man and the mother, you would be glad to be friendly to the girl. I never entered a more dismal house; and, besides, she is the only creature one cares to speak to in this lively, intellectual neighbourhood—and charming to look at."

"And in that final clause lies the germ of all your Christian charity," said his sister. She smiled a languid, half-unwilling smile, and looked at her brother, who was sitting on the end of her sofa, impatiently hitting his boot with his riding-whip.

They were in the drawing-room, a large handsomely furnished room, with narrow French windows looking on to a terrace. The curtains were of crimson velvet, and so was the low couch on which she was half reclining; and the chairs were gilded, and so were the legs of the little tables; and there was a beautiful old clock on the high white marble chimney-piece, with the row of family miniatures hung above

it ; there were cabinets in ormolu, with old china cups and saucers inside, and all kinds of foreign curiosities were lying about.

Everything was much more splendid and luxurious than when Geoffrey North had lived there, for if the Cleasbys were not very rich, at least they were not afraid of spending their money. Yet, as in Mrs. Oswestry's tiny drawing-room, there was an air of comfortable disorder. The pianoforte was open, and the music strewn about, and the writing-table was drawn up close to the sofa for Miss Cleasby's convenience, without any regard to the housemaid's feelings ; and a great black retriever lay stretched out on a bit of India matting in the sunshine which streamed in at the window, as if he were an established and lawful inmate of the drawing-room.

At first his presence might have surprised a stranger, but not when they had looked carefully at his mistress. Miss Cleasby was two years older than her brother ; and though there was some refinement and an approach to beauty in her face, you yet felt,

on looking at her, that although she was in harmony with the room, she was yet more in harmony with her shaggy black follower, and that the first connection was more the result of circumstances than the last. She was not slight, like her brother; her features, though regular, were wanting in delicacy of outline, and the modelling of the lower part of her face was massive. Her complexion was pale, but clear and somewhat dark, though her hair was of a pale brown, and her eyes were light grey. Her mouth was her only really good feature; but it was beautiful; not small, so as to be out of proportion with the rest of her face, but with lovely lines about the finely chiselled lips, and with a firm, kindly expression when in repose.

If, taking her as a whole, you said there was not beauty, you must still have confessed that there was something more striking than mere physical beauty. Her voice was sweet and rich, and her placid eyes clear, and the whole expression of her face as simple as that of a healthy, generous-minded child. She

was, as has been said before, half lying back on the sofa at the present moment, with one arm thrown carelessly behind her head, regarding her brother with languid amusement.

"Have it as you like," he said a little angrily; "if you have set yourself against it, I suppose it is no use arguing the point. I should have thought you would have been glad to be kind to her, and certainly it need be no penance to anyone; but if you don't like to do it, there's an end of it. Certainly, I like people better for being pretty to look at, but I am sorry for her too."

"I have no doubt you are, my dear Walter; of course it is natural, and under other circumstances you know I should say nothing against it; but here I do think your kindness misplaced."

"What kindness? It is not for me, but for you, to show the kindness. I have nothing to do with it."

"But you have everything to do with it. Look here, Walter, let your whip alone, and listen to me seriously for a little. Just forget for a minute that

you are that cautious, impartial, and disinterested young man that you know yourself to be. Suppose that you are somebody else—Algy Fielder, for instance."

"I wish I was; he is twice as good-looking."

"Yes, and three times as conceited; but that does not matter just now. Very well; you—that is to say, Algy Fielder, or any other young man—come to settle down on your place in the country, where you have no society, no friends, nothing but a little fishing and shooting, and a few county meetings to look forward to. You have never lived for any length of time in England; you take no interest in vestries, or cottages, or drainage, or poor laws; and the only person you care to speak to is one pretty girl, a girl who sees no one like a gentleman from year's end to year's end; a girl with a cross grandfather and lack-a-daisical mother, who probably, like you, has a dull life, and nothing in particular to think about. Indeed, she is much worse off than you are, for you have your books

and your sketches and your music. Very well, you of course naturally do your best to make yourself agreeable whenever you come across her; and somehow or other you do come across her very often, for you have told me so yourself. Moreover, there is a little touch of romance about it ; for her grandfather hates your name and everything connected with your family. You refer to this, of course, and hope that she——well, you know best how young men talk, and I won't attempt to give your words—Algy Fielder's words, I mean—and you are a man of the world, and have seen half a dozen girls quite as pretty as she is."

"I swear I haven't," said Captain Cleasby, under his breath. He had coloured in spite of himself, at her close approach to the fact just before, as he remembered his words to Christina when he hoped that she did not consider him a natural enemy ; but now he had recovered his composure.

"Very well; if you like it better, we will say that you do for the moment think her prettier than

other girls, and you talk to her just as you talk to pretty girls when you want to be agreeable; some people would say you flirt, but I don't wish to use the word."

"I don't do anything of the kind."

"Not you: we are talking of Algy Fielder, you know. Well, of course you—that is, he—being a man of the world, don't mean anything by it; but how is she to know that? Perhaps no one ever thought her pretty before."

"Then they must have been blind."

"Probably: but then ill-tempered relations are often blind to personal attractions, and now for the first time she knows how pretty she is."

"Stop a minute, Augusta; if you must preach, at least be logical. There is a flaw in your argument. Do you suppose that the sight of me for the first time induced her to look at herself in the glass?"

"No, I never said she did not know herself to be pretty, but she did not know how pretty she

was; she did not know, in fact, what it was to have others acknowledge it. Well, now we come to the root of the matter: taking all these circumstances into account, without being as conceited as Algy Fielder, you may see that there may be danger for her, and make up your mind whether the poor little girl ought to be sacrificed for your amusement."

"She is very nearly as tall as you," retorted her brother, "and not a bit like a poor little girl. You needn't make up such a piteous story, nor be so tragic. You will be telling me next that she is the rightful proprietor of this stately pleasaunce and these baronial halls. No, my dear Gusty, let us discourse of this temperately, and in ordinary language. To begin with, as I have said before, she is not little, nor to be pitied, but I should say quite accustomed to admiration—you have not reckoned on her handsome cousin and the fascinating curate—and quite able to take care of herself. It is I that am in danger, and you take no thought

for your brother. I may pine and fade, but you do not think of this."

"No, I do not think of it. I should have a better opinion of you, Walter, if I could think that you were capable of a serious attachment. Even in that case I should hesitate before forwarding your cause."

"I tell you I have no cause to forward."

"Exactly; and therefore, I say, leave the road open to the cousin and the curate."

"Such a big hulking fellow," ejaculated Captain Cleasby, discontentedly.

"But who will very likely make her a far better husband than you would."

"If that is your reason for refusing to call, it will be time enough to talk of that when I want to marry her."

"That is one of my reasons, but it is not the principal one. I now refuse to call upon her, just because I think it likely that any advances on my part will help to raise expectations which are

never to be fulfilled. Put it to yourself, Walter, what should you think if it were Algy Fielder?"

"Confound Algy Fielder! I beg your pardon, Augusta, but I can't conceive what has come over you to-day with your moralizings and your Algy Fielders. Is a man never to look at a girl unless he means to marry her?"

"Of course, anywhere, with other people looking on—anywhere, when it is fair play and each side knows what the other means and has equal powers of choice; but not when to one it is play and to the other solemn earnest. I deny that Ferdinand would have had any right to look into Miranda's eyes, and all the rest of it, unless he meant to propose to her."

"You mean that he should have left her for Caliban? Well, I won't dispute the fact. But I see what it is, Gusty; you are riding your hobby so hard that you can't see the plain unvarnished fact. I will allow with my usual candour that your romance, however highly coloured, has some sort

of foundation in truth. It is true enough that I did commit the indiscretion of calling upon my nearest neighbour, although I knew that he had a granddaughter; and it is also true that, finding her pretty and pleasant to talk to, I have since seen what I could of her, which is very little; and I will further allow that I should have liked you to become acquainted with her; but since you will not, there the matter ends."

"I do not say that I will not become acquainted with her. What I say is that I will not undertake the responsibility of making the acquaintance. If she comes here with her parent's sanction and at your request, it is another thing. In the natural course of things I should call; but as I call upon no one yet, I do not make an exception in her favour. You know if she came that I should receive her kindly: but for her own sake I hope that she will not come."

"You think very badly of me, Gusty," said Captain Cleasby with a curious smile. "In the

abstract you may be right enough, but you are wrong just now. Go out into the sun, and you will lose these fears of a tragedy which will never be enacted if your brother is to be entrusted with the principal part. Seriously, I will take care of her and of myself, though you are so indifferent to my chances of a disappointment; and now I must go, for I have an appointment with the architect to settle about those new farm-buildings. I am afraid I must drive past the White House, but I will promise to look the other way if I see a figure which could by any possibility be taken for Miss North, and if I am so unfortunate as to meet her on the road I will pass by on the other side. *Au revoir.*" He stood up, nodded with a smile to his sister, and stepped across the room and out on to the terrace.

CHAPTER VII.

In spite of his apparent unconcern, it was not altogether without being impressed that Captain Cleasby had listened to his sister's view of his conduct. He did not exactly blame himself for the past, nor did he think about it with any seriousness, but he did consider that it might be better perhaps to be more careful for the future. People might talk, and he should be very sorry to make her at all unhappy, though at present he saw no danger of it; and of course Augusta was quite wrong in the idea she had taken up of a little helpless unprotected girl, ready to lose her heart to the first man who admired her. It was quite true that Christina was utterly unlike the young ladies he had been accustomed to dance

with in London and abroad, with whom, as his sister had said, it would have been all fair play, and each party would have known what the other meant; but if she was unsophisticated, she was not the less able to take care of herself, nor the more easily dazzled by admiration, nor in the least like the little rustic beauty whose defence his sister had felt herself bound to undertake.

It was a straight road, and he paid little heed to his horse, except to keep a tight hand on the reins, and he smiled as he thought how impossible it was for Augusta to understand Christina without looking at her. She was so unlike other girls, and therein lay her charm. She was not shy, or even reserved, but frank and fearless, without a touch of self-consciousness or coquetry.

"It is a thing you cannot describe," Captain Cleasby said to himself, "but Augusta would see it in a minute if she met her." Then he drew up at the architect's door, and threw his reins to the groom, and forgot Christina in his plans and his business.

In the meantime business had also come to interrupt the train of his sister's thoughts. Captain Cleasby had not long left her, and she was still lying idly upon the sofa with a book in her hands, when there was a ring at the door, and the butler came to ask if his master was at home. There was a gentleman come to see him, and he handed her a card with the "Rev. John Warde" inscribed upon it. "The fascinating curate," said Miss Cleasby to herself. "He wished to see Captain Cleasby very particularly," the man said, "and he had brought some plans for him to look at."

"For the new school-room, I suppose. I am sorry Captain Cleasby is out. Ask Mr. Warde if he can leave the papers, Lewis; or wait,—if he can speak to me for a moment, perhaps that will do better."

She rose up lazily from her recumbent position, put aside her book, and bowed slightly as the clergyman entered the room, a little bored and a little amused at having to transact parish business with him. As for Mr. Warde, he was not the least

embarrassed, but strode over the velvet-pile carpet with his dusty boots, and sat down upon a little green satin chair with gilded legs, as comfortably as if it had been the old settee in Mr. North's parlour.

"I spoke to Captain Cleasby about the additional accommodation we required for our school-children a few days since," he began. "He seemed to think with me that the present building might very easily be enlarged by a wing to the west of the south elevation. In this way the present playground would not be encroached upon, and the effect of the exterior, although that is not of material importance, would not be interfered with. This is Mr. Gregson's drawing:" and he spread out a paper with pink and grey lines upon it, which were as unintelligible to Miss Cleasby as if they had been geometrical diagrams.

"Yes, I see," said Augusta, a little doubtfully: and she began to think how odd it was to be referred to about schools and additional accommodation, and educational improvements.

"We have ninety-four children under instruction," Mr. Warde continued, as if she must of necessity take an interest in the subject: "forty boys and fifty-four girls. I hope you will soon be able to come and see how it is working. I suppose you are better acquainted with the foreign system than with ours."

"I don't quite know. I am afraid I don't know much about either. I never thought of going to the schools abroad. I don't know anything about systems. The population did get itself educated, I suppose; but I declare I don't know where or how. It is all in the hands of the priests, I believe."

"Then it will be all new to you."

"The school? yes, of course."

"We have night schools as well, twice a week, for boys. I don't think they answer for girls, at least not in country parishes. These I manage myself without the assistance of the schoolmaster."

"That must be a great bore for you," said Miss Cleasby languidly.

"It is my business and part of my duty, you know," he answered, surprised at this entirely new view of his position. "I shall be very glad if your brother likes to look in some evening, but it is in the Sunday-school more especially that I want a lady's assistance."

"You don't imagine that I can be of any use, I hope," said Augusta; and she was too much astonished even to be amused at the suggestion. "I know nothing whatever about children, or teaching, or anything of the kind. You could not come to a worse person. It is quite out of the question for me: and I don't imagine that my brother will be of much use; but I will tell him what you say. I could not teach half as well as I could fly, and all your little boys would laugh at me; I am sure they know a great deal more than I do."

"You could take the infants," said Mr. Warde, gravely, without disputing the assertion.

"Oh no, I could not. I once did hear a cousin of mine instructing some babies, and I could not have

answered the questions she asked them :—Who was Samson's father? From what is cochineal made? What are the properties of gunpowder? And there they sat, dangling their poor little legs, and were expected to know all about it."

But Mr. Warde had done his business, and he was ready to take his leave, and had no idea of keeping up a conversation.

"You will kindly let your brother see these plans," he said; "and he will perhaps let me or Mr. Gregson know what he thinks of them." He only waited for her assent, laid down his papers on the table, and had made his bow and taken his departure, before she had time to recover from her surprise.

"The bluntest, most unconciliatory man I ever had the pleasure of talking to," she said to her brother afterwards. "I do wish you could have heard him talk, as if his schools and his little boys were the most interesting and important things in life. It was no amusement, as there was no one to be amused with, but I wish that you had been there."

"Oh, I know the man well enough. He is a good fellow, in spite of the nails in his boots. Don't fly in his face, Augusta; I am the 'Squire,' and have a position to maintain."

"By all means; be ten times the Squire, if you like, only don't call upon me to act the Lady Bountiful."

"He does not preach badly, either," Captain Cleasby went on; "no highflown nonsense, nor unnecessary pathos. Do your duty, and don't lie or steal or slander your neighbour, or it will be the worse for you some time or other,—that was about the substance of his discourse last Sunday. I don't say it was eloquent or impressive, but at least his ploughmen stood some small chance of understanding what he meant. You shall come next Sunday, Gusty, and set a good example to the parish."

But, as it happened, next Sunday Captain Cleasby alone made his way to the little brick church on the heath, where the scattered population gathered every Sunday twice a day to hear Mr. Warde read the lessons and pray and preach. The morning had been

wet, and breakfast was late at the Park; and so it came to pass that the time slipped away until it was too late for service, and Captain Cleasby played chants on the pianoforte, because, as he said, he did not want to run counter to English prejudices; and Augusta read her letters, and puzzled over the lawyer's instructions about the will and the deeds, and tried unsuccessfully to get her brother to attend.

"Walter, what does Mr. Waltham mean by your liabilities? I thought all this had been settled long ago. You told me you had no debts worth mentioning. I thought you had paid off everything before we came home. What does he mean by not seeing his way clearly? I wish you would attend to your own business letters, and not hand them over to me. The will is proved, isn't it?"

"What! the will—of course. Do just listen to this sequence; I never heard a more perfect combination of chords."

"I wish you would leave the chords alone, and

attend to me for a minute. As far as I can make it out, things are all in confusion. Mr. Waltham says something about letting you know more a few months hence, and hoping that there is really no cause for anxiety. What does he mean? I can't understand what he means."

"I never supposed that you could, my dear Gusty; lawyers' letters are not adapted to the feminine capacity."

"Then why can't you attend to it yourself? I suppose you mean Mr. Waltham to have an answer. I do wish you would tell me what he means by all this about the deeds."

"All what about the deeds?" said Captain Cleasby: and this time he was roused, and got up from the music-stool and took the letters from her and glanced at them. "I wish you wouldn't make such a row about it," he said—and he thrust the papers deep into his pocket—"there is nothing to make a fuss about; things are never settled all in a minute just after a death, and old Waltham is an uncommon

admirer of his own style. Lawyers are like ladies, and like to make a fuss."

"It has nothing to do with Mr. Waltham's style, Walter; don't put me off in that way. I can't understand it all; but I am not so foolish as not to see that he thinks that your affairs—and, after all, your affairs are my affairs—are in some danger of coming to grief. Be serious for a little, and tell me what it means."

"It is a long story, and you would not understand me any better than Mr. Waltham. I would not have let you see the letters if I had thought there was anything to worry you in them. You are not strong, I believe, since that chill you caught coming over, or you would not take up these ridiculous fancies. There, let it alone; upon my word and honour, there is nothing to be worried about. Thank goodness, there is the luncheon bell: Lewis rings it with as much pomp as if there were twenty people to be summoned; but, after all, I am not sure that the pomp is misplaced: meals are the great events here.

Come, Gusty, and afterwards I shall go to church and pray for your peace of mind."

She had been in the right, of course, and it was not only proper but natural that she should ask questions about what concerned her so nearly; but yet somehow he had had the best of it, and the consciousness of this pervaded his mind as he made his way across the heath to the village church. Still he was not sufficiently self-occupied to overlook the contrast which the scene before him offered:—the heavy rain-clouds making a dark purple ridge along the horizon, the patches of blue sky overhead, the gleams of sunshine on the glistening heather, the gusts of wind sweeping over the level heath; and then the church bells ringing with a peaceful regularity, and the farmers standing in knots about the church-door, and the cottagers passing in by twos and threes, and the little procession of demure school-children: and then the graves and moss-grown tomb-stones, where bitter tears had been shed and despairing vows made sacred, though now they

were overgrown with weeds, and silent and forsaken.

Captain Cleasby was neither reflective nor sentimental, and yet he noticed it all, and carried away the picture in his mind, and thought of it in after days with the admiration of an artist.

The little church was unusually full of worshippers that afternoon. There were the old men and women walking in couples, arm-in-arm together, up the aisle: they had most of them been married at those altar-rails, and one day they would sleep with their forefathers in the churchyard outside: and there were the young people, who thought that day was for them a long way off, opening the books and finding the psalm-tunes; and then the mothers hushing in their arms the babies who were too young to be left at home. And they all looked at Captain Cleasby as he walked up the aisle, and whispered to each other about him, for he was still a stranger to some of them; and yet he was the "Squire," and belonged in a way to each one of them. He walked up the

aisle alone, and entered the big pew in front of the pulpit, and then he looked to see if Christina was in her place; but he did not see her, for she was sitting on the other side of the church, with her aunt, Mrs. Oswestry. Christina never looked in his direction, yet she knew quite well that he was there, and knew that his sister was not with him, and she was sorry for it, for she had hoped to meet Miss Cleasby and make her acquaintance in a casual way, without going against her grandfather's wishes to visit her at her own house. But Captain Cleasby was alone, and she did not now want to meet him. The service was over, the clerk had followed Mr. Warde into the vestry, the organist was playing the last voluntary, the congregation were dispersing, and as Captain Cleasby passed down the church he for the first time became aware of Christina's presence.

"Wait a little, Aunt Margaret," Christina said in a whisper: and Mrs. Oswestry, imagining that she wished to listen to the organ, did wait, until the last note had been struck and the church was

almost empty. Then they also rose and made their way out. But late as they were, there was a little knot of people still gathered about the porch, and Captain Cleasby was among them. He was talking to Mr. Sim, the churchwarden, and no one could have accused him of waiting for Christina; so he had said to himself, when it had occurred to him whether it would be better not to keep up the intercourse which his sister considered so injudicious. "Nonsense, what did it matter? her aunt was with her." So he had said to himself: and he merely bowed as they came out, and finished his conversation with Mr. Sim; and it was not until they were some little distance from the churchyard gate that he came up with them, inquired after Mr. North, and asked to be introduced to Mrs. Oswestry. He saw at a glance that she was not like the women he was accustomed to meet in the neighbourhood. She was not particularly interested in him, nor anxious to be conciliatory, nor did she smile upon him like Mrs.

Gregson and Mrs. Sim. In fact, she did not, like Christina's mother, "feel the difference," but as a mother and an elderly woman she felt herself superior in wisdom and experience to any young men who might cross her path. Like Christina, she was a democrat; and moreover, she did not stand like her upon the equality of youth. She was kind, but she was grave, and not in the least disposed to admire Captain Cleasby, or give him credit for better qualities than he possessed. Neither was she surprised at the friendly way in which he talked, but considered it quite natural that he should wish to be on pleasant terms with his nearest neighbours.

"I had the pleasure of meeting your son the other day, Mrs. Oswestry," he said; "but he told me that you were away from home: and now that you have come back he has left you, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he is in the north, and will be absent for some time."

"And in the meantime you are to be quite alone?" and then he turned to Christina. "Don't you think it is your duty to go and take care of your aunt in his absence?" he said, thinking how much easier it would be to see her there than at the White House.

"Aunt Margaret doesn't want me," said Christina.

"I need say nothing about that, because Mrs. Oswestry is here in person to controvert your plea."

Mrs. Oswestry was not altogether pleased by his manner. She would have thought it impertinent but for his pleasant voice and deferential looks.

"I am here, but not to controvert it, Captain Cleasby," she said; "Christina understands me when I say that I do not want her. Her proper place is at home; and when you have come to my time of life, you will find that rest and solitude have their charms. I am not apt to feel lonely. We elderly people are content to wait and look back upon the past."

"It is the looking back that I should be afraid of, when it comes to be looking far back."

"Surely not, and there is not only pleasure but profit in it. Our experience ought to be worth something to ourselves, for it is of little use to anyone else."

"That is a hard saying," said Captain Cleasby; "why will young people be so perverse? But seriously, now that we all believe in the progress of the age and the march of the intellect, I really don't see why age should count for so very much. We should not have much respect for Methuselah's opinion now. He was old, but the world was young."

"Yes, the world was young, but I don't know that its wisdom has increased with its age. The same mistakes have been made over and over again, and repented of afterwards. You will grow wiser, Captain Cleasby, in reproducing commonplace follies, and gradually laying them aside."

"But at least there is hope whilst we are young.

You see, Miss North, we need not despair, and may learn our duties in time. But whilst we are on the subject of duties, won't you tell Miss North that she owes something to society, and that it is a social duty to come and see my sister?"

"Captain Cleasby cannot understand our ways," said Christina, colouring as she spoke; "we do not visit people, and grandpapa remembers old times, and he does not like to be reminded of them."

"He need never be reminded, he need never be told, if your aunt will give her sanction. Come in now," said Captain Cleasby.

"No, no; Christina would not like that, and she is quite right. But she would have much pleasure, I am sure, in making your sister's acquaintance," said Mrs. Oswestry, a little coldly, for his proposition had not pleased her; "I think she is mistaken in imagining that my father would have any objection."

"Then you will use your influence. My sister has not been well, and she goes nowhere, so it

would really be a charity. You will be forced to come at last," he said to Christina, with a smile; "but it would have been with a better grace and more complimentary to us if you had come of your own free will."

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. OSWESTRY had seen little of society. She knew nothing of the ways of the world, and she had no "small talk," as people say; but nevertheless she had read, and thought, and formed her opinions, and knew how to express them. Captain Cleasby was clever enough to perceive her superiority to the Overton ladies in general. He was not a man who cared for deference or flattery, though he was too indifferent to be irritated by it; and he thought Mrs. Oswestry a sensible woman, and saw that she was a perfect lady. Her cold yet gracious manner, her sweet voice and harmonious intonation, her plain black dress and fine face, had all prepossessed him in her favour. He was not

liable to serious impressions, nor was she a woman to impress him; but yet he was not a hypocrite—it was simply his custom to be courteous; and when he said, as he took leave, "You have given me something to think of," Mrs. Oswestry was not in the least deceived, and never imagined that he would give her words a second thought. She was essentially a just woman, and it was not because she was attracted by him, but merely from a sense of what was fitting and proper, that she did not forget to urge upon her father the expediency of Christina's going to call upon Miss Cleasby.

"So Christina wants to go, does she?" said the old man, moodily. "I should have thought she would not be so anxious to go to the Park. I'd never have thought one of mine would have cared to set foot within the house again. But it's only an old man's fancy, I suppose. No one asked the young fellow to come here; but he comes when he likes; and I suppose Christina will go if she likes."

"No, I won't, if it hurts you, grandpapa."

"No, it don't hurt me—not much, any way. I shall soon be dead, and then I reckon nothing will hurt much."

"You shouldn't talk in that way, grandpapa," said Christina, steadily; she was well accustomed to this form of complaint, and heard it with a mixture of anger and pain. "You have no right to talk as if people would be glad when you died. These people are ready to be friends with us, and I don't remember about old times, and I should like to be friends with them, but I say I would rather not go if you don't like it."

"Christina is right," said Mrs. Oswestry; "it is natural that she should be ready to make friends, but you know that she means it when she says she would rather not go if you object to it."

"I hate the subject," said Mr. North. "What do you all make such a fuss and palaver about it for? Christina can go if she has a mind, if you think she ought, Margaret. I suppose you are right—you

always have been in the right since I can remember; and you were a nice little girl too, only so quiet. The sister won't be wanting to come here, I suppose. There, Christina, I hope you are pleased."

"Yes, I am, grandpapa," said Christina, frankly. For her the visit to the Park had nothing painful about it. She had no recollections to make her fearful of the ghosts which might haunt those rooms; ghosts of happier days and unfulfilled hopes; ghosts which linger round the places where our happiest and saddest hours have been spent, where the commonest objects or the most trivial sounds carry us back to those bygone days, awakening our smiles or tears as we stand once more in the presence of an almost forgotten past. It may have been buried beneath other hopes and visions and cares and sorrows. Perhaps for a time we strewed its grave with flowers; perhaps we feared to pass the spot, and shrank from speaking of it even to ourselves: but yet it is not dead, and some day it may stand before

us again, more near to us than the present, more comprehensible than the future, and clothed with immortality.

But as yet Christina knew nothing of this, and she had no fears.

"Shall you go by yourself?" her mother said. "I could not go—it would be too sad for me; but perhaps your Aunt Margaret would take you if you asked her. I wonder you can like to go to that big house and strange people all by yourself."

Christina was standing before her glass, smoothing her hair back from her face, but now she turned and took up her hat.

"I don't see that the bigness of the house makes any difference," she said; "and as to strangers, it is only Miss Cleasby. I know her brother: and, besides, he is in Overton this afternoon."

"And are you going just as you are? Oh, Christina, I do think your other dress would have looked much nicer. You don't know what a grand place it is, and they are grand people too."

"Then depend upon it they won't think about my dress," said Christina lightly. But she went back to the dressing-table and tilted up the glass with her two hands so as to see herself better. And perhaps it was not wonderful that she smiled as she looked. She was a little excited by going to the Park, though she would not own to it, and her cheeks had more colour and her eyes more brilliancy than usual, and she could not help recognizing her own beauty. If her muslin was not new, what did it matter, when it fell in such graceful folds? She turned away once more from the glass and threw back her head a little, and smiled at her mother.

"Never mind my dress," she said; "I think you make a mistake about the Cleasbys. We are every bit as much ladies and gentlemen as they are. It is only that they have more money, and that does not make any difference really. Good-bye, mother; do not vex yourself. I shall come home soon and tell you all about it."

It was singular that, though Miss Cleasby was

about as great a contrast to Mrs. North as could be imagined, in her manner and ways of thinking, on this occasion of Christina's first visit to the Park their expectations wore somewhat the same aspect. It was not that she felt the difference as Mrs. North felt it, or that she had any feeling of pride or superiority; but she knew, of course, that Christina had been differently brought up from them, she knew that her belongings and all her surroundings were poor. She might be as much a lady as herself, but she could not have the same manner of speech nor cast of thought as if she had lived more in the world. It was one thing to see her amongst her natural surroundings, or standing on a picturesque bit of moorland, and quite another to see her in the drawing-room at the Park. Men could not understand until they saw; but she looked to Captain Cleasby's disenchantment, and was sorry for Christina, though perhaps it might be better that the spell should be broken before it had taken strong possession of her.

"I did not know that you had such an exclusive

taste for exotics," said Captain Cleasby, when she expounded her views to him.

"I have not. For my own part I should be glad enough to get out of the stifling artificial atmosphere in which they flourish; but it does not improve matters to transplant wild-flowers into conservatories. They look shabby by the side of the natives of the place, even if they continue to exist. Depend upon it, Walter, I am right. I don't say that we have the best of it: the hill-side may be a better place than the garden, but we belong to the one and not to the other."

"Good gracious, Gusty, you talk as if we were the mighty of the land! I thought you were possessed of a more liberal spirit, you who talk rank radicalism when it pleases you. Now you are as proud as old North; as for his granddaughter, I can assure you she does not think of this for a minute. There is not the least danger of her heart fainting within her at the sight of our magnificence."

"It is not our magnificence, it is something quite

different. That is why I say again I am sorry that you will keep up this acquaintance, and sorry that you have asked her to come here. You think her manners perfect now; if you saw her with other girls, you would all at once become aware that there is something wanting; you could not explain what it is, neither can I. You think her always beautifully dressed; if you saw her in this room you would see at once that her muslin was faded, and her hat not the right shape—in fact, if you saw her in a drawing-room you would see her with other people's eyes: on the hill-side she is charming, I allow. Then all she has to do is to look pretty, but if she comes into society she has everything to learn; and if she cannot talk or behave like other people, it is not enough to look pretty."

"You have not seen her," said Captain Cleasby. "I won't tell you anything more about it, because it is impossible to make you understand. I think you will find yourself mistaken."

But after all he was not so sure about it himself,

and he could not help acknowledging that there might be a great deal of truth in what his sister had said. It was quite true that Christina spoke to him freely and frankly, and with the graceful unconsciousness which was one of her greatest charms; and it was also true that she had none of the awkwardness which accompanies shyness or a sense of inferiority. She liked him, he knew, but he did not imagine that she looked up to him. All this he acknowledged to himself, but at the same time it was quite possible that Augusta might be in the right; she had put her arguments cleverly, and they swayed him in spite of himself. Perhaps she was right that, beside the girls whom he had been accustomed to meet with, the girls he had known in London and abroad, Christina might appear to a disadvantage. She must always be beautiful, but, after all, beauty was not everything. He hoped Gusty would be kind to her, but already she had succeeded in imparting her misgivings to him.

In the meantime Christina turned in at the Park gates, in happy ignorance of all the expectations which others had entertained of the manner in which she would make her entrance. She was full of vague anticipations of something new and unknown, and charming in its novelty, which was about to be displayed before her, and she was curious and wondering what she might see and hear; but she was curious to see Miss Cleasby, because she was Captain Cleasby's sister, and because she might constitute a new element in her life, not because she was an important person in the neighbourhood, nor because she lived at the Park. And as to the impression she herself might make, she did not think of it at all. She was too proud and too unconscious, perhaps too careless of other people's opinion. She could not have been ashamed of their position, as her mother was, poor woman; but then she had no regrets to weigh her down, nor thoughts of what might have been. She cared little for her own beauty, but yet she knew that she was pretty,

and perhaps the consciousness added something to her courage. But in spite of all this, in spite of her enterprise and frank simplicity, she would not have gone so easily to the Park if Captain Cleasby had been at home. She knew him, and she did not know his sister, but yet she preferred to introduce herself. It was not until she had watched him drive past the White House on his way into Overton that she laid aside her work and announced her intention of going to the Park that afternoon. She had not asked herself why it was so; she would seek his sister, but she would not seek him. She had told her grandfather that she wished to be friends, but she felt whilst she said it that for some reason or other she could not be friends with Captain Cleasby. Perhaps, after all, her mother was right, and there was a gulf between them which could not be passed; perhaps it was true that a barrier had been raised between prosperity and poverty, between them and people of the world. Only she had not felt it so much at

first, and she did not feel it now when she thought of his sister. But she knew it was otherwise with Captain Cleasby; if he came she would be glad to see him, only she could no longer be as friendly as she had liked to be; and though she was not used to being afraid, she was afraid to go to the Park if he were to be there. He was not there to-day, however, as she knew, so she followed the butler across the great stone hall, with the glass doors opening on to the garden, and the flowering shrubs blossoming in the stands: and though her eyes were full of light, and the colour was glowing in her cheeks when the drawing-room door was thrown open for her to pass in, it was only because she was a little excited by the novelty of the thing.

Miss Cleasby was sitting at her writing table at the further end of the room, but she rose when Christina came in, and went forward to meet her, and held out her soft, shapely hand, and looked down at her, not tenderly, but with a generous dispassionate gaze, and was struck, as she could

not help being struck, by her beauty. This was not the little, shrinking, village girl she had expected, to whom she had meant to be kind, since she must come and it could not be helped. Christina was very slight, but, as her brother had said, she was almost as tall as herself, and she held her head like a queen, and she looked straight into Miss Cleasby's eyes with the candid inquiring look of one who, for her part, has nothing to conceal. And then she glanced round the luxurious room, at the mirrors and the cabinets and the gilded furniture, with admiration, and no awe.

"How pretty it all is," she said: and she looked round with the open admiration of a child.

"Yes," said Augusta, vaguely. She was astonished, and had not quite recovered herself, and she sat down again and looked at Christina much as Christina looked at the new surroundings, only in her look surprise predominated. And she was much more sorry for Christina than she had been before; she was not a little, vain girl, as she had

imagined, but perhaps that made it worse—she would not be so easily consoled; and she was not a child, to be played with and put aside at pleasure.

Augusta was a woman of the world, and perhaps even a little *blasée,* but it had never been her habit to trouble herself to find conversation, and as she had nothing particular to say she kept silence, and leant back in her chair and twisted her pen about in her fingers. And then Christina came to an end of her survey of the room, and turned her eyes upon her again.

"I believe I am in your way; don't you want to finish your letters?" she asked; but even now there was no shyness or awkwardness in her manner.

"Not in the least; my letters will wait. It is too hot to be busy, and I am very glad of an excuse to be idle. Won't you take off your hat and stay with me, if you have nothing better to do? You know we shall live here perhaps for

ever and ever, and I want somebody very much to tell me all about everything, and who are the good people who expect to be asked to dinner, and who are the people who won't come to meet them; and who is the young lady that likes to be asked to sing, and who is the young gentleman that likes to listen to her. You must tell me what the politics of the place are, you know, that I may not be treading on people's toes."

"But I don't really know anything about it, Miss Cleasby. You know grandpapa is getting old, and we see hardly anybody at all. We know so few of the Overton people, and we have no one to dinner except Mr. Warde now and then."

"Oh yes, the clergyman. Of course one's clergyman one always respects. I think I generally respect them too much to ask them to dinner. Somehow, it detracts from their dignity to see them eat; and then, I don't know anything about schools, and district visiting, and poor people. I am afraid I am not capable of clerical conversation."

"I don't know about conversation," said Christina; "but I don't think you would laugh at Mr. Warde if you knew all the good that he does. You should hear the people speak of him. And it isn't because of what he gives; he makes them independent enough, only they know that if they were starving he would go without his dinner any day for their sake, and he doesn't care what he does if it is for their good. He takes half of the parish work in the next parish, because the Vicar is an old man and doesn't care much about things; and many nights, I know, he is called up to sick people miles away from here because they like him so."

"Don't be indignant," said Augusta, lazily; "I have no doubt he is a hero. And it is fine too, when one comes to think of it, to give up one's life for people who are so far off from one, or to give up one's life for anyone at all. I wonder why he thinks it worth while."

"It is not the reward," said Christina, still a little indignant.

"No, I suppose it is not the reward: I don't quite see what reward he could look to. And yet there can be no enthusiasm to carry him on: it is not like mission work, where there is some excitement and a chance of martyrdom. It is this plodding work among carters and turnip-fields that must be so disheartening. I wonder why he thinks it worth while."

"The people like him, and that must be something," said Christina; "but I believe he would do it all the same if they did not. It is rather curious, but I believe he does it just because he thinks it right. And after all, the carters are just as nice as other people, or nicer; I don't know why you say that they are far off."

"Yes, I know; I can talk about liberty and equality and universal brotherhood too, sometimes. I don't quarrel with you for that. By all means let the ploughmen have their right, and let us share our bread and butter with them—there is enough for us all. But don't think that it will bring them any

nearer. They won't understand us, and we shall not understand them."

"Do people ever understand each other?" said Christina. She began to think how little she could conceive of the feelings of those nearest to her, of those with whom she had always lived. How inexplicable to her was her grandfather's bitterness and her mother's despondency,—and she sighed as she thought of it.

"Do we ever understand ourselves?" said Miss Cleasby: and then she paused, and her moralizing ended in sudden laughter. "We are growing dreadfully metaphysical," she said, "discoursing in this way of social questions and human nature. But seriously, is the career of a district visitor the only one that is open to one here? because your Mr. Warde seems to expect me to go and tell his little boys all about Joseph and his brothers on Sunday afternoons, and I do not feel that my capabilities are strong in that line."

"I don't know why you call him my Mr. Warde," said Christina, "and I am afraid I can't tell you much

about the parish. Of course I know the people, at least a great many of them; but I don't go to the school, because I don't know how to teach."

"Poor Mr. Warde, I begin to commiserate him," said Miss Cleasby; "he has evidently no sympathy or assistance. I do believe that I shall be obliged to offer my valuable help after all."

From that they went on to other subjects. Miss Cleasby spoke of her life abroad, the things she had done and the people she had seen; but all the time no word was said of Captain Cleasby or of his acquaintance with Christina.

Perhaps in each of their minds there was an unconscious reference to him in his connection with the other: Christina's predominant feeling was that her new acquaintance was his sister, and Miss Cleasby looked at her visitor, not as at a casual stranger, but as at the girl that Walter was amusing himself with.

Yet they both started when suddenly a shadow darkened the window, coming between them and the

level rays of the afternoon sunshine, and Captain Cleasby stepped into the room.

He stepped in from the terrace, and took off his hat and held out his hand to Christina.

"So you are here at last," he said with a smile.

His manners were as easy and unembarrassed as ever, and his entrance was no unnatural interruption to their conversation; and yet, though he had been in their thoughts, his presence changed the aspect of things and caused a revulsion in each of their minds. Augusta leant back in her chair, rather taking the attitude of a spectator, and Christina drew a little away from her, and sent her quick, startled glances about the room, as if seeking for a subject of conversation or a pretext for departure.

"Do you remember the house at all?" said Captain Cleasby; "I suppose it has been a good deal altered, but you know you are visiting your own ancestral halls." He had sat down on the end of the sofa opposite to his sister and Christina, and looked at them both as if he were a little

curious as to the mutual relations which the visit had brought about between them.

"I remember very little about it," said Christina; "I was only three years old, I think, when we went away—no, I must have been older, but I don't remember it well. I recognized the staircase, because I tumbled all the way down that flight of stairs into the hall; and I remember the passages just beyond, because Bernard, my cousin, and I used to play hide-and-seek there; but I believe that is nearly all."

"That is very disappointing. I hoped you would have all kinds of associations, and have been able to hand down to us the traditions of the place. It seems to me you are very hard-hearted."

"No, I am not; only I forget. I suppose, if I remembered, I should be unhappy at having to see strangers here; but I forget, and so it doesn't matter to me."

"And now you have said the unkindest thing of all," said Captain Cleasby. And whilst they were

speaking, Miss Cleasby sat watching, lazily leaning back in her chair, and with her eyelids half lowered over her eyes; but she roused herself and spoke before Christina could answer her brother's last speech, which indeed she had not thought to answer.

"We were discoursing of much pleasanter and more profitable things before you came in, Walter," she said; "men always will be so personal. Now just observe the difference: we had been considering the condition of the poor, the constitution of society, the means of reform and their effects, not to speak of human nature in all its aspects; you come idly sauntering in at the window, the idea of the most expeditious way of reaching the sofa the prominent one in your mind; and instead of applying yourself to the solution of these weighty problems, you immediately engage us in frivolous speculations as to our individual past."

"Which at least is a subject upon which we are qualified to speak, my dear Augusta, and it is nonsense to call personal talk frivolous. When we

talk of ourselves, are we not talking of the subject that lies nearest to our hearts?"

"That is your personal experience, I suppose."

"Captain Cleasby does not mean that we can get rid of other people or other things," said Christina; "at least I suppose not; he only means that they are interesting in their connection with ourselves."

"That is only another form of selfishness."

"If you like to say so,—though, considering our relationship, the doctrine has its advantages for you; for of course the consanguinity enhances the interest, and in my eyes invests you with many imaginary charms: but I will not give it up, simply because it would be an impossibility. Why are our possessions dear to us, but because they are our own? Why may we not have a peculiar affection for the places in which we have been born and bred? Why may I not take pleasure in thinking that Miss North has run about my passages and stood at my table to taste the wine in her grandfather's glass?" said Captain Cleasby, a little patheti-

cally; but though he addressed his sister, he was looking at Christina.

"You may be right," said Miss Cleasby; and, though she was vexed at his speech, she showed no annoyance. "I suppose we do regard our belongings, whether things or people, as worthy of more honour because of their connection with ourselves. That is why we put our great-aunt Rachel in a frame and hang her up over the mantelpiece with the other family miniatures, although, unless the artist did her great injustice, she must have been one of the plainest young women ever seen. Have you looked at her, Miss North? She hangs just between my grandmother (taken, I believe, in the character of Amaryllis) and my brother as a little boy."

"Yes, I see," said Christina: and she went to the mantelpiece and stood looking at the miniatures hanging there by their faded ribbons on the background of crimson velvet, as they had hung before the Cleasbys went abroad, when some of the men

and women who looked out from their frames in the freshness of youth were still looking back to that time and growing old and greyheaded.

"They are nearly all dead now," said Miss Cleasby. "Do you see that young man in the uniform? That was my uncle Charlie: he was always sickly; but he would go into the army, and he was shot some time in the Peninsular War, I believe, when he was only five-and-twenty. Then there is his brother George, that square-looking man: he was a physician, and older than Charlie, but he only died two years ago. There was one other brother, Uncle Robert, and he is alive still, and the only really rich one among us. The girl there is their mother: she was pretty, I believe. Oh,—do you think the little head below like Walter? It was done when he was six years old."

It was the picture of a child in a scarlet blouse, with his fair hair cut in a straight line across his forehead and falling down upon his shoulders. He was a delicate-looking boy, and even now there

was a likeness to Captain Cleasby in the rather deep-set eyes and in the sensitive lines about the mouth.

"Yes, I think it is like him," said Christina, smiling.

And all this time Captain Cleasby had taken no part in what was said; for, naturally, the repetition of his family history had no interest for him and the only thing of which he was distinctly conscious was Christina, standing before him on the rug, resting one hand on the mantelpiece as she looked at the miniatures. And now he knew that his sister had been wrong in her anticipations. Christina might be different from other girls, but nothing could detract from her charm and her beauty. Augusta had been quite wrong. She was perhaps a little shy, her looks were a little startled, but there was nothing awkward in the touch of shyness; perhaps it was more attractive than the perfect confidence she had shown at first, and he felt instinctively that it was not caused by her

position in the house, nor by the sight of what he had called their magnificence, nor by anything so external to herself. She was beautiful, but that was not all. Her voice was sweet and low, but it was a voice that could ring out at times, and her smile was sudden and vivid: and as to her dress, his sister was always well dressed; she was magnificent even in her mourning; but nothing could be more graceful than the soft folds of Christina's muslin. He noticed it all, even the little hand hanging down by her side. It was not so white as his sister's, it was slighter and narrower, but yet there was force about it. The misgivings his sister had raised up in his mind faded completely as he looked at Christina, standing there in her unconscious grace, frankly looking round at all there was to see; but another misgiving had arisen mingled with pleasure and pain, a misgiving which he would have put from him, but which would not be dismissed.

There are light natures which yet have the power of conceiving and in some sort comprehending passions

which they have never experienced and depths which they have never sounded. What they see is strange, it is sometimes ridiculous, and yet they feel in themselves that it exists. Faintly and dimly was borne in upon Walter Cleasby, through the sensitive fibre of his artistic perceptions, a sense of something which moved and stirred Christina's being, and vibrated through all the jarring discords with which her life was filled. He did not seek to analyse it; he strove rather to put away from himself the knowledge of its existence; but nevertheless the sense of it would at times flash across his spirit, mingled with a fear of coming perplexity and trouble. He was not a vain man, and Christina certainly had given him no cause for vanity: she had not sought him; when he had crossed her path she had met him with a friendly frankness which had no coquetry in it; but now, though she was frank as ever, there was a certain shy excitement underlying her manner which troubled him a little.

"I must be going home," said Christina, turning

from the chimney-piece and taking up her hat. There was nothing in the words; but somehow it seemed to him that the tone of her voice had changed.

"Oh, don't go yet," said Captain Cleasby; "wait a little longer. I am sure they can do without you for one afternoon. You go away just as I come home."

"But I must go," said Christina. "Good-bye, Miss Cleasby."

"Thank you for coming," said Miss Cleasby. "Good-bye. You will not expect me to come to your house; you know that I go nowhere now:" and she did not ask Christina to come again, though she was very different from what she had expected and her visit had been an amusement and interest to her.

"We will come to the gate with you," said Captain Cleasby, "if you will allow Augusta time to make up her mind and to get up from her chair. Come, Gusty, the sun is quite low and it will do you good to get a little air."

"Will it?" said his sister, rather doubtfully; but she did get up from her seat and consented to walk down the hill to the gate, all three talking together of indifferent things and loitering in the evening sunshine.

"You will come again," Captain Cleasby said to Christina, as they parted at the gate; but Christina made no direct answer, neither did his sister second his request.

"Why could you not be a little more friendly?" he said, as he turned back towards the house with his sister. "No one asks you to put yourself out of the way; but, if you like her, why not be friendly?"

"Are we to go all over the old ground again, Walter? You know very well why. She is quite unlike what I expected. I won't call her a poor little thing any longer; but I am just as sorry for her as I was before, and I know very well what it means when you are so anxious that I should be kind to my neighbours."

"I should feel just the same about it if I were at Kamschatka. It has nothing to do with me; I can see her as much as I like without your having anything to do with it. And, after all, I am not an Apollo. You are quite ridiculous about it, Augusta!"

"No, I am not. I know you are not an Apollo,—that is nothing to the purpose; and as to your seeing her, of course you could see her; but what you want me to do is to take the responsibility off your hands, and that is an office I decline."

And then they talked of other things, and did not, as some people might have done, come to a quarrel on the subject. The Cleasbys were a sweet-tempered race—and perhaps they neither of them thought it worth while.

CHAPTER IX.

MEANTIME, Christina went to her home with the visions which her visit had called up still before her mind. She had not been recalled to the past by anything that she had seen; she did not think for a moment of the future, which at that time seemed far distant; she was occupied with the glimpse she had had into another world, and she dreamt only of the things that had been before her—of Captain Cleasby's looks and words, of his sister leaning back in her chair and looking at her with lazy curiosity; and of the frame in which these things were set,—of the luxurious room and the brilliant flower-beds below the terrace and the pictures on the wall and the great stone hall. Thus, to the anticipations and

longings which had filled her lonely life there had succeeded the all-absorbing interest of the present. It was not that she was dazzled by the admiration she had called forth, or that she thought much about it, nor that she regarded the Cleasbys as her superiors. It was pleasant to hear them talk, and she wished that she might go again: but she would not go unless Miss Cleasby asked her, and she knew that she had not asked her this afternoon; that, though she had been kind and courteous, she had not spoken of future meetings or closer intercourse. But as yet she did not ask herself the reason of this, and it was another who first disclosed to her Augusta's motive. It was after she had told of all she had seen and heard, sitting by the parlour window, whilst her mother sighed and listened, half with regret and half with pleasure; and Mr. Warde, who was there, wrote copies at the table for his night school, but now and then joined in the conversation.

"Of course they don't care for us any more than

we care for them," said Mrs. North; "but, after all, that is no reason for not showing civility. If you were to go there once to satisfy Miss Cleasby's curiosity, I think you might have been asked to go again for your own pleasure."

"She was very kind," said Christina. She was sitting at the open window with her work lying idly upon her lap, and one hand played with the creepers which clustered round the wooden framework.

"You don't know about people being kind," said her mother; "you never think of what they say to you. I talk and talk, but I don't believe you hear one word out of ten. And Miss Cleasby might have asked you to go again. I am sure it is not our fault that her brother is idling about the place; we never asked him, and I don't see that it is our fault if he does come."

Then all in a minute there flashed across Christina's mind the meaning of his sister's manner and the explanation of her silence when he had begged her to come again. What did it mean? Why

should he not come to the house if he chose to come? Why should she—why should anyone object? And as she asked these questions she leant farther out of the window, and looked down upon the roses, that the evening wind might blow upon her face.

"He seems to be rather an idle young man," said Mr. Warde. "I daresay that he is somewhat of a charge to his sister."

Christina said nothing, but she could not help laughing a little softly to herself at the idea of Captain Cleasby being a charge to anyone or causing his sister anxiety. Life came easily to them, she was sure, and was not, in their eyes, the serious thing that Mr. Warde considered it to be.

"I don't quite see why people should not be idle if they like," she said.

"There is an old song which seems to show that if they do not find fitting employment for themselves, someone else will provide them with work injurious to themselves and others," said Mr. Warde.

"Of course I know the tiresome old hymn," said Christina irreverently; "but it is pleasant to be idle. I like to sit here in the window and do nothing, and I don't see why I shouldn't."

"You have not been idle," said Mr. Warde. He got up from his chair and walked to the window, and looked gravely at the scattered rose-leaves which had fallen under Christina's restless fingers. Christina laughed, but she blushed a little at the same time.

"You should not intimate so plainly who has provided my work for me," she said; "it is not very polite. But I will do my work now, or write your copies for you if you like."

"Thank you; but I prefer my own handwriting."

"What are you setting as copies?" said Christina, coming to look over him: "'Command your temper'! Oh, Mr. Warde, I hope you were not thinking of me!"

"I wish you would sit quiet," said Mrs. North plaintively, "and take some sensible employment;

or, if you must talk, at least talk rationally. One would have thought you would have been saddened by the sight of your old home, but somehow it seems only to have made you foolish."

"I can't be always mourning and repenting in sackcloth and ashes," said Christina petulantly; "and if you don't want to hear me talk, I can go to grandpapa."

"I cannot understand Christina," said her mother when the door closed upon her; "she is so childish in some ways. Sometimes the least thing is enough to put her out, but she does not feel for our real troubles. When one thinks of what we have lost and the little that is left to us, it is very heartless in her to be so unconcerned."

"No, no, not heartless, Mrs. North: you forget how young she is. Little things, such as seeing new people—such as going to the Cleasbys to-day—make events in her life. Do not grudge her any happiness; depend upon it she will have enough of sorrow to bear."

"Everyone has sorrow, nobody knows that better than I do," said the poor woman; and there was more of real regret and less of discontent in her voice than usual. "I don't want her to have sorrows,—her life is not such a cheerful one; only I should like her to have a little more sympathy."

"I think you do her an injustice," said the clergyman; "do not forget that she is very young, and her life has been a sad one in many ways. Good night, Mrs. North; brighter days may yet be coming," he added, as he gathered up his books and prepared to take his departure.

He was a sanguine, contented man, and yet Mrs. North's murmurs and discontent did not anger him as they would have angered some men. Even her melancholy retrospections called forth sympathy from his liberal and tolerant spirit, though they were as foreign to his own nature as Christina's vague longings and aspirations. He thought much of the Norths as he walked home that evening—of the old man's increasing sullen bitterness, of the

widow's sadness, of the money difficulties which he knew were growing upon them, but mostly of Christina, whose natural happiness was changed at times to rebellious discontent and whose youth was clouded by the cares and painful struggles of a poverty-stricken home. It was not much that he could do, he thought, but what he could do should be done. Unless, indeed, Christina could be taken away, and then—would that be right by her grandfather and her mother? Thus he speculated without arriving at any definite result; only from that time he went more to the White House, and as troubles seemed to thicken round her he often came to shield Christina from her grandfather's anger and her mother's reproaches;—not that she felt them very deeply; perhaps she might, as her mother said, be heartless; or she had some hidden spring of gladness of which they did not know.

Miss Cleasby did not come to the White House, nor had Christina again been to the Park; yet they met as such near neighbours could not help

meeting; they met in the lanes, and sometimes walked together; or Captain Cleasby came to see Mr. North, and lingered in Mrs. North's parlour afterwards, and he would ask Christina to come and see his sister, but Christina would not accept his invitation. And so the summer months passed away, and it seemed to Christina that the flowers had never bloomed in such beauty and that the summer winds had never blown so softly and that a glory hung over the brown heath which it had never known before.

In a fortnight it would be September, and the Cleasbys were not to be quite solitary any longer: some men were coming to stay there for shooting, and one or two ladies, though they were still living very quietly.

In a few weeks Bernard would be returning home. It was a long time since Christina had heard of him or thought much about him: she did not see his mother very often, and, when she did, Mrs. Oswestry was as unwilling as herself to enter upon

the subject. She had a misgiving that the young people might have been foolish, and she thought it best that absence and silence should work a natural cure; more especially since she had received her sister-in-law's confidences about the hopes she entertained respecting Mr. Warde's relations with Christina. But now Bernard was coming back: he wrote in good spirits and was prosperous and happy; nevertheless, he said he was counting the days until his return, and there were one or two little touches in his letter which made his mother uneasy, though there was no mention of Christina. And now they would be meeting again, and she must speak of him or it would seem unnatural, and tell Christina that he was coming back.

"I expect Bernard to come home in two or three weeks," she said one day when Christina was with her in her garden, tying up some flowers which had been beaten down by a storm the night before.

"Oh, is he coming back?" said Christina as indifferently as she could; but she bent her head

over the flower-bed and turned away that her aunt might not see her face. And Mrs. Oswestry could not but see that she was moved, and misinterpreted her confusion, thinking, as was natural, that her flush was a flush of pleasure, and that she was shy of showing the gladness the tidings had brought her. She did not know that they brought her no pleasure, but a rush of shame and regret, and a longing to escape that she might not be forced to meet him. She did not know that the memories which constituted Bernard's happiness had become an oppression to Christina which she would fain have put from her, which she actually had put out of sight during his absence, but which had started from their resting-places at the sound of his name and the prospect of his return.

Yes, they had arisen, and were now crowding her mind and overwhelming her with reproaches. She could not help thinking of him as she bent over the flower-beds, feeling the first pang of the knowledge which had been thrust upon her; as she

walked quickly home across the heath; as she sat over the sewing in the evening; as she lay upon her bed at night;—through all, the thought of Bernard stood before her—of his return and the inevitable meeting. And yet she had not meant to be untrue. She had not changed towards him; only she no longer looked to the Homestead as her future home, and she dreaded the revival of old hopes. She gave a sigh of relief when she remembered that three weeks lay before her, three weeks of liberty: she would try to forget it, for she could not think what she might do; she could not make up her mind until there was no longer a way of escape.

In the meantime the fates in which she trusted were weaving new nets for her feet and preparing fresh pitfalls along her path. Miss Cleasby had gradually made some acquaintances in the neighbourhood, and now she was about to gather them together as a return for the civility that had been shown her; and they were pleased at the novelty

and the little excitement, and thought the Cleasbys seemed nice people; for they had seen more of Captain Cleasby than Augusta, and had fortunately heard nothing of the discussion which took place between them when the plan was first suggested.

"Yes, my dear Walter, certainly,—if you think it will be proper; but what do they eat, and what do they drink, and what will they do with themselves when they do come?"

"They are not barbarians," said Captain Cleasby; "I suppose they will do what other people do. A garden party is always a stupid business, but I suppose they will like it."

"It is the sports,—the sports and pastimes that weigh upon my mind," said Augusta, languidly.

"Well, we must put up some croquet-hoops, I suppose; there is no need for you to take any part in what you call the 'sports,' though I never heard such a word used except in connection with school-feasts, and it is suggestive of nothing but boys jumping in sacks."

"Sacks! boys in sacks! a school-feast! I declare you have hit upon the very thing! We will ask the neighbours to look on; it will give them a sense of superiority, and they will not expect to be entertained themselves. I know how the thing is done—I have seen it. Benches full of little boys and girls, clothes' baskets of cake, watering-pots of tea. We can do it beautifully on the lawn, and it will please Mr. Warde."

"The devoted Curate! of course. But oh, Augusta, I don't think I shall like it at all. Will other people like it?"

"Why not? They can play croquet or dance if they like in the remote perspective. And then we shall have done our duty by the parish."

"Is this the sister who hated schools and poor people and everything connected with the office of Lady Bountiful?" said Captain Cleasby, raising his eyebrows slightly. "I would not be a stumbling-block for the world; only forgive me, Gusty, if I say it is not quite in character."

"Am I never to grow wiser? Surely I may be inconsistent if I like!"

"Of course: only I suppose I am privileged to make my observations; to examine the motive and the final cause. If you were an ordinary young lady, I should suspect you of admiring the Curate; but you, my dear Augusta, have a soul above curates."

"I object to generalizations," said Miss Cleasby; "there are differences in curates. As to Mr. Warde, most certainly I do admire him for his energy and devotion to his 'work,' as I suppose he would call it. It is curious that a man should throw himself into it in the way he does. I declare the other day he came up here so full of some lad or other he wanted us to take on at the farm, because he was not doing well where he was, getting into bad company and bad ways, that really I began to feel too that Jim Barrow's future was of the highest importance and an all-absorbing interest. I laughed after he was gone, to think how seriously I had bent my mind to the consideration of the matter."

"You cannot make me afraid for you," said Walter, smiling, "though you do look so unkindly upon my little predilections; I nevertheless give you leave to admire the parson as much as you like. Shall we say the 4th—that will be Tuesday—for this festivity? How amused people would be if they could see you and me giving a school-feast! But in these uncivilized regions, where no one knows us, I suppose it seems quite natural and proper."

Thus it was arranged, Captain Cleasby only further stipulating that Christina should be asked. "She will be our greatest ornament, always excepting your curate, Gusty;" he said; and though Miss Cleasby answered that "she would be more ornamental than useful," she had of course no wish to exclude her from so unlimited an entertainment.

The neighbourhood generally was pleased: Mrs. Sim was sure that it was very kind and her daughters would be most happy to assist in any way which lay in their power; and Lady Bassett, an old friend of General Cleasby's, who lived at

the other side of Overton, heard Augusta discussing her preparations, and laughed and declared she should drive over with a party,—it would be so amusing to see Augusta doing the honours. The Gregsons were coming, and Mr. Warde, of course; and Christina had received a cordial invitation from Miss Cleasby. She would not say no, but she hardly knew whether she was pleased at the prospect of going among numbers to the Park. It was not that she was troubled by any of the misgivings which tormented her mother, as to how she would appear among the neighbours of whom she knew so little, and among the Cleasbys' grand friends who were strangers to her; nor that she thought of them in connection with herself: but that now for the first time she was to see Captain Cleasby among his old acquaintances, the people with whom he had interests and reminiscences in common; and she wondered if the new circumstances would divide her from him, and if she would again see the barrier which lately she had almost overlooked.

The broad stretch of level lawn, lying at the bottom of the steps which led down to it from the terrace at the Park, was, as everyone said, the very place in which to give a school-feast. The low fencing separated it from the fields which lay beyond, sloping down to the road, and the big cedars bounded it on the one side, whilst the flower garden and standard roses lay on the other. The flowers were still fresh and blooming, although it was the beginning of September, for there had been rain the week before; and Captain Cleasby had disconsolately depicted the misfortunes attendant on a wet day. "I know how it will be, Augusta," he had said: "a fine morning, of course; no excuse for postponing this dreary festivity; but just as we get them seated at the tables, down will come the rain, and we are in common humanity forced to invite the whole host, wet boots, fustians, and everything else, into the house."

"It will not rain," his sister had answered; "I won't allow such grumbling:" and she had proved

right; and Tuesday came, and the sun blazed fiercely as a September sun should, and the long cool shadows lay across the lawn, and the south wind blew over the brilliant flower-beds and fluttered the folds of the white table-cloths.

Augusta stood at the top of the terrace steps to receive her guests, but it was early as yet and the school children had not arrived.

"Dear Augusta, I am so pleased to see you looking so well," Lady Bassett said, as she stepped out from the drawing-room on to the terrace and came forward and kissed her; for she had known her for years, and she was a very affectionate gentle woman, with a fair complexion and pale blue eyes and a caressing manner. She had her two girls with her and several other young people, and they all clustered round their hostess with some cordiality and more curiosity, for they were seeing her under new circumstances, and Augusta was not generally popular with young ladies.

"Oh yes, thank you, I am quite well again," she

said, in answer to Lady Bassett's salutation: and she did look not only well, but very handsome, standing there in her deep mourning among the girls in their muslins and coloured ribbons; for there was something striking in the contrast, and her long black dress suited her massive beauty better than anything lighter or more girlish.

"Come and sit down," she said to Lady Bassett; "it is so hot, and the children have not come yet:" and then she sat down herself in a low garden chair, and paid no more attention to her younger guests; for it had never been her habit to put herself out of her way for anyone; so she sat pulling a geranium absently to pieces, and did not even pay much heed to Lady Bassett, who talked at intervals, and mentally wondered why Augusta's manners had not improved. She had been a good deal in the sun that morning, and the chair was very comfortable, and Lady Bassett's voice was apt to sink into a murmur, and the wind blew very softly, and everything combined had a soothing effect; and when Captain Cleasby

came round to the corner of the terrace where they were sitting in the shade, to beg his sister to come and receive some new arrivals, he found that her eyes were closed, and that she was breathing softly, with her hands lying loosely upon her knees. Lady Bassett was still talking, but she was looking away from Augusta, with her parasol between her and her auditor.

"I was just telling your sister," she said, "that in my opinion you ought to have some more flower-beds on the other side of the cedar. A cedar is always such a dark thing," said Lady Bassett, a little contemptuously.

"Yes, you are quite right—very dark indeed," said Walter, hardly knowing what he said in his vexation, and only anxious to shield his sister's misbehaviour. "I came to take Augusta away: the Creeds have just come;" and he took one of his sister's hands as he spoke. "Gusty, you must really come," he said, with rather more sharpness in his voice than the occasion seemed to Lady Bassett to warrant.

"Oh, Walter!" said his sister, slowly opening her eyes; and then she smiled languidly.

"You know Admiral Creed, don't you, Lady Bassett?" Walter said, to give her time to recover herself. "He lives three miles on the other side of Overton; they are the oldest established people hereabouts I believe."

"Yes, of course I know them. Your brother is quite right, Augusta; you had better go and receive them,—he is rather a touchy old man. Come, my dear, you have really spoken to nobody but me."

"I thought Walter was equal to any number of young ladies," said Augusta; "they are really much more in his way than mine." But at last she did relinquish her chair and went towards the cluster of young ladies and the young men who were straying about on the terrace, rather as if they did not quite know what to do with themselves.

Admiral Creed was looking hot and fidgetty, for no one but Walter had been there to receive him, and he was anxious to explain why his wife had

not come, and to represent that his presence was only to be accounted for by the necessity of chaperoning his daughter; but he calmed himself at Augusta's approach, and only wondered that she did not seem to miss Mrs. Creed at all.

"I think you might make up a croquet set now,—some of you young people, I mean," she said, thereby giving mortal offence to the Admiral, who was the most noted croquet player of the neighbourhood and pursued the game with the enthusiasm of youth. "Walter, are the hoops there? I hope they are in the shade. Is your son with you, Admiral Creed?"

"Yes, he is on the lawn somewhere: and I thought I might bring a friend of his—Fielder; I think he said he used to know you."

"Of course—we are old friends," said Augusta; and she held out her hand to a handsome young man standing a little in the background, and smiled as he said something of pleasure at meeting her again, thinking of the conversation she had had with

Walter, in which Algy Fielder had taken so prominent a part. But she had not any more time for him now; people were arriving fast, and although Lady Bassett and her party kept rather distinct from them, the Overton people all knew each other, and there was a buzz of talk and a sound of laughter as they stood about together in groups or looked on at the croquet players knocking the balls about on the lawn. And then suddenly there was a little pause in the conversation of those standing nearest to the glass door, and people looked round; and although Captain Cleasby's back was turned, he felt instinctively that Christina had come amongst them.

He knew it quite well, even before Algy Fielder exclaimed, "Who is that girl, Cleasby?" and he answered without turning round, only for a minute interrupting his conversation with Lady Bassett: "Oh, that is our neighbour, Miss North."

"He knew it by instinct," his friend said, laughing: and then, though Captain Cleasby still talked on to Lady Bassett, he moved to the back of her chair, so

as to see how Christina was received; and he saw that people looked at her a little strangely; they did not know her, and she did not know them; the Overton people were affronted at the attitude taken towards them by Mr. North, and would not be the first to make advances to his granddaughter, who now came amongst them for the first time, alone and unprotected. And he saw too that Christina remained standing still for a moment irresolutely; and though he was a little anxious, his eyes rested with pleasure and pride upon her graceful figure. He was too far off to see clearly, but he knew quite well how erect she was holding her head, and how her beautiful eyes were looking round fearlessly at them all.

"How on earth did you know whom I meant?" Algy Fielder asked him.

"Simply because she is the only girl about here you would look at twice," he answered, in a low tone so that Lady Bassett did not hear; and it was true enough that he had known well that Christina alone

among his guests could call any marked attention upon herself.

His sister went forward to meet her, and he noticed with pleasure the cordiality of her greeting; and then she introduced her to some of the other visitors, and Captain Cleasby, relieved from his fears lest she should be slighted, went off to attend to the croquet players, and did not at once go to speak to her.

Soon after there was a general crowding to the front of the terrace, and the croquet players interrupted their game, for the children, headed by the teachers, came walking in procession across the lawn, waving their blue and yellow banners; and Mr. Warde followed, evidently occupied with the business of the day and thinking chiefly of how his children would demean themselves; and there was a general bustle and the children gathered round the tables. Most of the visitors remained standing upon the terrace, preserving their attitude of spectators, but Christina went down the stairs to speak

to the poor people whom she knew and be civil to the teachers; and Miss Cleasby too went down on to the lawn, and shook hands with Mr. Warde.

"I hope everything has been properly arranged," she said; "please give any orders you like—we know so little about this sort of thing. Need they sit any longer staring at their plates, or is that a necessary part of the proceedings?"

"Grace has not been said yet," said Mr. Warde; and then he moved to the end of the long table, gave the order to stand, and took off his hat. Somehow, after all the gossip and laughter that had been going on around her a minute before and which was going on now at the further end of the lawn, there was something ludicrous in the rows of solemn faces, half fearful, half expectant, and the sudden silence. Augusta could have smiled, but for Mr. Warde's imperturbable gravity, as he said grace in sonorous tones, simply but solemnly, standing bare-headed on the lawn.

And then the real business of the day began.

Some of the young people came down from the terrace to help in waiting on the children, and if the principal actors were grave and silent, at least laughter and merrymaking went on around them, to which they paid no sort of heed; and the young men made their little flattering speeches, and the girls smiled and chattered, passing in and out of the sunshine and the shade; and Captain Cleasby sat on the end of one of the tables, talking to Christina. There he stayed in spite of Lady Bassett, who smiled as she passed, and told him it was an undignified position for the master of the house, and in spite of Mr. Warde's frank remark that he was rather in the way.

"Why should they want to disturb us? It is very hard that I mayn't have my little pleasures," he said to Christina.

He had seen that people looked at her curiously, and he was determined to make it up to her—or rather that had been the motive he had avowed to himself when he first took his place by her, but it

was forgotten now. Augusta was too wise to make any attempt at interference, but she noticed it as she sat under the cedar, and it confirmed a determination she had conceived some days before.

"What a pretty girl! but who is she?" said Lady Bassett, looking at Christina.

"She lives close to us—a granddaughter of the old Mr. North who used to live here, you know," said Augusta. "I don't suppose you would be likely to have met her before; they keep very much to themselves. We don't know them very well, though we are such near neighbours."

"Walter seems to know her pretty well," said young Fielder, putting up his eye-glass.

Miss Cleasby took no notice of the observation, but she heard it nevertheless, and turned away rather quickly to speak to Admiral Creed; but she could not escape from discussion of the Norths.

"So that is one of the Norths who used to live here?" he said. "I remember their leaving, of

course, but I understood the old man would see no one now. They were entirely ruined—the son did something very discreditable I believe—this girl's father I suppose."

"I suppose so," said Augusta: and soon after she got up and walked away to speak to Mr. Warde, who was arranging what she had called the "sports and pastimes."

"The Cleasbys seem quite to have taken up the neighbourhood," said Lady Bassett.

"With a vengeance!" said Admiral Creed. "Upon my word, there are heaps of people here I hardly know. The parson she seems to think so much of is an excellent fellow I believe, but he is not a man you care to ask to dinner!"

Thus did people look on at their hosts from their various points of view, while the shadows lengthened and the sinking sun blazed upon the windows of the house; and gradually they began to disperse, and the children's spirits flagged, and Mr. Warde got them into order and marched

them off, cheering lustily for the "Squire" and his sister.

Miss Cleasby was still lingering on the lawn, though the grass was growing damp with dew, and she owned to being tired of it all. Many of her guests had not yet taken their departure; and when Admiral Creed's carriage did not come, Miss Cleasby proposed that they should go into the house, for already it was growing chilly and the sun had set.

Conversation flagged, as was natural, during the quarter of an hour which followed. Admiral Creed fretted and fumed, and openly wondered why his coachman was so unpunctual; and the young ladies tried to make friends with Miss Cleasby's retriever, who was as indifferent and unsociable as his mistress; and Captain Cleasby, who might have been of use, had gone to the stables with some of the young men. But the time did not seem long to Christina. She had not yet gone home, because just now she was not so placed as to make it

convenient for her to take her leave. She was standing in a recess of the window just behind the curtain, and old Mrs. Gregson was sitting before her and had begun to tell her a long story about a school-feast she had once given when she was first married. The old lady was very deaf, and Christina was called upon to make no response, and could only smile and nod her head in answer; and Mrs. Gregson was pleased and thought that she was a nice girl and interested in an old woman's talk, and did not know that Christina was only living the afternoon over again and smiling at her own recollections.

And so Mrs. Gregson went on in her quavering animated old voice, and Christina stood there half leaning back against the open window, and her lips just parted with that unconscious smile, when, suddenly, voices in the garden outside struck upon her ear and brought a change over her thoughts. There had been laughing and talking going on all around her, and she had paid no heed to it, she

had not even heard it; and the voices below the window outside on the terrace were not loud, and she was not listening, and yet as she caught the first word her attention was fixed and she could not help hearing what was said.

"Don't be such an idiot, Algy. You will be asking me next if I have any intentions with regard to old Miss Trenchard, who wears a front and a poke bonnet!"

"So I shall, my dear fellow, when you devote yourself to Miss Trenchard for a whole afternoon and speak to no one else,—of course, if you did, people would begin to talk."

Christina did not tell herself that they were speaking of her, but a sudden flush came over her face, and she made an involuntary movement as if to escape; but Mrs. Gregson was in front of her, still chattering on placidly, and there was a table in the way, and she was as it were hemmed in on every side.

"Half the harm in the world is done by what you call 'talk,'" she heard Captain Cleasby say. "As to Miss North, somebody said she was to marry her cousin, so I wish you would not talk nonsense: she is a charming girl, and I should be very sorry that any mischief should be made by a friend of mine."

Then there was a tramp of footsteps on the gravel, and Christina knew that Captain Cleasby had moved off, but still the conversation went on below the window, and now it was young Mr. Creed who spoke.

"It is all very well for Cleasby to talk," he said, "but he cannot expect people not to be amused at his way of going on. Do you remember how he flirted with that girl at Naples, Fielder? I believe his sister was very angry about it; and all the world was astonished when she married that Captain Davison."

"I rather think you had better keep your reminiscences to yourself: he was not half pleased

at my making fun of him about Miss North: and after all I don't wonder,—she is pretty enough for anything; but I suppose he will look out for money, or connection, or something, if he ever does get himself——"

And at that moment Christina came suddenly out of the corner, pushing against the table and interrupting Mrs. Gregson's discourse, and coming forward into the middle of the room.

"Are you going?" said Miss Cleasby, as she came up to her with her cheeks still flushed by the sudden rush of shame and indignation, and her lips no longer parted but firmly shut.

Yes, she was going, she said: and she made her way out from amongst them all, and went rapidly down the slope towards her home, that she might not run any risk of again meeting Captain Cleasby. "Why did people say such things?" she was thinking to herself as she passed along quickly. Oh, it was cruel, it was horrible; why should people say such things just because—because—

Captain Cleasby had been friendly to her? Her afternoon had been so happy: she had not thought of anything but the pleasure of the moment; she had not been in any way deceived, and yet Captain Cleasby had been different from usual. And now she knew that all the time he thought she was going to marry her cousin. It was some silly report, of course—no one really knew how matters stood between her and Bernard, except themselves;—still his words had given her a sharp pang. How indifferently, how carelessly he had spoken! "She is a charming girl." The words came back to her, and the tone of his voice as he had uttered them, and indignation almost mastered her pain. Then again she said to herself that it was not his fault: he was anxious that people should not, as he said, talk about her, and she supposed it was his way to be soft and gentle and friendly. His friends had spoken of that other girl abroad who had married Captain Davison; but what did it matter to her? why should he not

have admired other girls? Only now she would be on her guard, not because of him, or of herself, but because no one should have cause to blame him or her.

CHAPTER X.

THE dusky air was heavy and sweet and damp with the gathering dews of a warm autumn evening: it is a charm quite distinct from the after-glow of summer sunsets, and yet it has an attraction which perhaps nothing in summer can equal. Faintly, very faintly, the stars were beginning to shine forth, and the young moon showed a dim image of herself rising above the woods, whose varied foliage had faded into one soft grey line rising and falling in wavy outline against the sky, hardly distinguishable from it in the waning light. The fallen leaves no longer rustled, but lay damp and soft beneath her feet, as Christina made her rapid way along the avenue under the great lime-

trees. And now she was passing down into the Hollow where the White House lay; she had reached the gate, and for the first time she was roused from her own thoughts, roused to surprise and a sort of vague fear. There was a carriage standing in the road, and the house-door was wide open, and a sound of murmuring voices came to her as she stood for a moment in the garden. Her mother was in the passage with a man, and now she could see that it was the doctor.

"No excitement should be permitted, my dear madam," he was saying pompously, waving his little fat, white hands. "In these cases quiet is all-important. Mr. North is evidently a nervous subject; he should remain quiet until to-morrow. I will call early in the day."

"Oh, what is it?" said Christina, coming up, pale and with frightened eyes.

"Don't alarm yourself, my dear young lady. It is nothing to alarm yourself about. Your grandpapa is not so young as he used to be, and we

must all expect these little accidents as we get on in life. He has had a slight seizure. I have been begging your mamma to preserve absolute quiet in the sick chamber, and I think we may hope to see him much better to-morrow. I will call early," said the little doctor; and then he rubbed his hands together complacently and trotted away down the garden-walk.

"Why didn't you send for me?" said Christina, unreasonably enough, yet with the remorse so natural when we have been making merry and feasting whilst a misfortune has fallen upon the place we left vacant.

"How could I? Whom could I send?" asked her mother fretfully. "What good could you have done if you had been here? It was all so sudden. They said it was something paralytic. I sent for Dr. Evans, of course, and then by the time he came your grandfather was better and nearly himself, and very angry with me for having sent for him. What could I do? It is nonsense to say that he

is not ill. He *is* ill, very ill indeed; and he may die, though Dr. Evans does like to rub his hands and talk about rest and quiet."

"No; why should he die? Why do you say such things?" said Christina, with impatience; and she went in sadly, and took off her hat and cloak, throwing them down carelessly on the old chest in the hall, and pushed back the hair wearily from her face. How happy she had been in the morning, and how changed it all was now! Yet it was not her grandfather's illness which had wrought the greatest change of all. She went gently into his room, where he was sitting in an easy-chair. He was striving to look as usual, but there was a strange pallor about his face, and an unnatural stiffness in his attitude.

"I hope you are better, grandpapa," said Christina, softly.

"I am no better for seeing that little fool Evans. Why can't a man be left to himself if he does feel a little faint, I wonder? A glass of brandy would

have brought me to in a second, if they had had the sense to give it me, instead of moaning and sighing and sending for the doctor. You mind, Christina,—if ever I'm taken like this again, you give me a dram, and don't let anyone come near me with a medicine-chest."

"You will be better when it is cooler, grandpapa," said Christina, without answering him directly. "It is so hot to-night:" and she went and put back the curtains from the window, and looked out into the misty twilight.

"I should be better if I had not such a lot of worry," said Mr. North; "it is hard when a man is growing old and he has no son to take his place and nothing but women about him. It would be very different if you had a brother, or if you were married, Christina."

Christina shivered and pressed her hands together. "Can't I do anything, grandpapa?" she said wistfully.

"No, of course you can't; women are of no use except to spend money and get themselves married.

But, after all, if you were to be a girl, I'd just as soon have had you as anyone else; you're not such a fool as some and you're uncommonly pretty."

He spoke irritably, yet he looked at her with pride.

"Go and see what messes they are getting ready for me, and send Janet up," he said. "Good-night, Christina; you are as pale as a sheet."

Christina went down to the parlour, where candles had been lighted and where her mother was sitting, and mechanically took up her work.

"It is something on his mind, I do believe," Mrs. North was saying; "he hasn't been himself for weeks, and now the rent has been due this fortnight, and goodness knows where it is to come from. If he could give in and let it rest, we might do well enough, but he'll never let it be till we are all in the workhouse. He won't take a favour even from Mr. Warde, though he is such a friend. Did you see him this afternoon?" said Mrs. North: and, as she asked the question, she laid down her work and looked a little anxiously at Christina.

"Yes, I saw him," said Christina; and she was too sad at heart to be impatient of the question and of her mother's anxiety: and after that they stitched in silence until the old clock struck ten; then they rose and stole noiselessly up the stairs to their own rooms. But Christina did not go to bed; she put down the candle on the table and walked restlessly about the room.

She had been strong only because she was proud, and her pride had received a shock; she had said to herself whilst her indignation was still strong within her, that she did not mind, and anger had forced back the tears and deadened the pang; but when she was alone in silence and solitude, when there was nothing to distract her thoughts, she vainly strove to banish her recollections. All but the one thing faded into insignificance: she forgot her anger, and her resolutions, and her pride, and the only thing that remained with her was the consciousness of Captain Cleasby's words and the knowledge which they had thrust upon her. *Then*

she knew that the words of no other man on earth could have mattered so much to her. Again and again as they came back to her this consciousness grew stronger, but yet she would not own it to herself. "It is nothing to me," she said, over and over again, and then she began to think how impossible it was that it should be anything to her. He had been kind and friendly always, and that afternoon he had perhaps been something more. No; why should she think of that afternoon? she knew now that he had not meant it. And then she was pledged to Bernard. Involuntarily she clasped her hands tight together as she thought of it. Why should she not be true? Why should she be afraid? What was there in her relations with Captain Cleasby to make her afraid? He was not like Bernard. Bernard was handsome and eager and upright, and he cared for her—he had cared for her always. And what was Walter Cleasby? He was not handsome, like Bernard; he was slight and pale, and there was no enthusiasm or impetuosity about him;

she had never heard him say or do anything remarkable. She said to herself that people would not call him very clever,—he had never distinguished himself; he had no public spirit nor active interest in practical matters; he was not even very anxious to do his duty; all his life he had been accustomed to go his own way and wander at his will: and yet she knew that there was something that made her afraid for herself, only she would not be conquered; she would own to no one that she had cause for fear.

If Miss Cleasby had feared for Christina before, she feared none the less now, though her brother had ridiculed her fears, though he had declared to her seriously that there was no possibility of any attachment on her part. He had assured her that he had not the slightest intention of marrying her or anybody. "I believe it is my marrying that you are so much afraid of," he had said; "for I am sure you think it would be a very bad speculation for anyone to marry me." Then she had answered

that she might have had some such thought, but yet that it was not his marrying that she feared most.

"I think any girl you married might be disappointed, Walter," she had said: "but what I fear most is that you will make Christina unhappy; that she may learn to care for you though you do not care for her."

Miss Cleasby was quite aware of her brother's faults, and, though very fond of him, she was blinded by no sisterly partiality. What was it, then, that made her fear for Christina, even as Christina had been forced to fear for herself? He had not the beauty of feature, nor that of high health, and yet there was a force about his slight figure which broader and stronger men lacked: other men's eyes might be larger and finer, but they had not the light which glanced in his; and then his mouth, like his sister's, was beautiful, and there was something peculiar in the sweetness of his smile. Augusta had loved him since he was a little delicate boy in holland blouses, independent, undemonstrative, and

gentle; and then she remembered him as a schoolboy, not conceited, but self-reliant and unambitious: and then as a young man abroad, fond of society, and popular, and more or less idle. He never seemed to have exerted himself, and yet he had somehow contrived to learn something of nearly everything. He had done creditably at college; he knew something of music; he could sketch in water-colours, and take a likeness; he knew a little botany and geology; and, living so much abroad, he had easily acquired modern languages: what was more, he could talk about everything which he knew, and about some things which he did not know. Perhaps he knew least of theology; yet he would not have been at a loss, dining in company with bishops and divines. At the same time he never paraded his knowledge; simply he had a capacity for throwing himself into the interests of those around him and making use of any materials which might come to hand. He had charmed Mr. Gregson by his appreciation of his architectural drawings; he had won Farmer Rawson's

heart during the hour he spent walking over his fields with him, discoursing of the crops: and this though he knew next to nothing of architecture or of farming. But perhaps it was with women that he got on best. With elderly ladies there was something about him at once self-reliant and deferential, which gave them a motherly feeling towards him, and he had always been popular with girls. Yet, whilst frankness was not his distinguishing characteristic, there was nothing hypocritical about him. Without being deeply affectionate or easily impressed, he was friendly, unfastidious, and open to kindness. He himself was wont to declare to his sister that he was a sham. "I can appear to know almost anything," he had said. "And to like almost everybody," she had added; but she smiled at him as she said it, and in truth she did not well see how he could be other than he was: there would always be a charm about him which nothing could destroy; and it was all this which made her fear for Christina.

She had lived in the world; she understood its

temper without caring much to conciliate it, and could foretell its judgments without greatly respecting them. She had been what people call fashionable; she was now a little tired and *blasée*, but she neither was nor ever had been a worldly woman. Her fear, as she had confessed to her brother, was not lest he should marry Christina—though it would have been desirable that his wife should bring him money or connection, she would have been content that he should forego these things in a marriage of captivation, where the charm was one she could herself appreciate and feel,—but, as she had said, she did not believe that he was capable of a serious attachment; nothing in his manner or his words had led her to suppose that any such thing could spring from his intercourse with Christina. He liked her as he liked other pretty girls, only perhaps rather better, because of her ingenuousness and peculiar beauty; and she felt that Christina would not be content with this—at least, she would not be content if the present state of things were to go on much

longer. Was it not natural that in her lonely life this new element should create a dangerous stir and raise a storm which could not be allayed? She had not thought of it so much before that day of the school-feast; but when the girl came out of her corner in that abrupt, startled way, with her eyes so bright and her cheeks so flushed, and held out her hand to say good-bye, Miss Cleasby had felt it tremble in hers, and all her fears had been strengthened. What had they been saying to her? What had wrought the change? Had Walter gone further than he had meant to go? or had that old Mrs. Gregson interfered to warn her? No; she did not think that possible: Mrs. Gregson would not have been likely to see or hear anything. And yet she ought to be warned, and she had no friend or relation to speak a word or do anything to guard her. She almost wished that she were herself her friend or relation, that she might speak some such word; but the position in which she stood as his sister seemed to make it impossible. Then she bethought her that,

after all, such considerations ought not to stand in her way: she did not think that she could go straight to the girl herself; but if by some chance she might meet the mother or the aunt, she had almost resolved that she would speak some ambiguous word of warning, which, without compromising her brother or Christina, might serve to make her friends discourage the meetings and constant intercourse. Yet she had formed no distinct plan; she had not as yet met Mrs. North; she did not wish to go to the White House; and if the thing could not be done easily, she was not disposed to make any violent effort to accomplish it. However, fortune favoured her. She was driving into Overton the day after that in which Christina had been at the Park, and her brother had asked her to drop some birds at the White House on her way.

"At any rate this is an offering to which old North cannot take exception," he had said; "though I verily believe, poor people, a leg of mutton would be more to the purpose; but the

conventionalities forbid one to bestow legs of mutton on one's friends."

And Miss Cleasby had started, driving herself in the pony carriage; and when she drew up at the gate of the White House, Mrs. North was in the garden. Her first instinct had been to draw back; but Miss Cleasby introduced herself so pleasantly and asked so cordially after the old man, that Mrs. North could not but respond civilly, and she came and stood by the carriage, talking for a few minutes whilst the groom took the birds into the house.

It was not much that she was able to say; but she asked for Christina, and heard that she was out on the moor, and then there was reference made to her brother, and she owned that he too found the moor very attractive—she was afraid that he idled away a good deal of his time.

"He finds it very dull at home, I am afraid," she said. "You see, Mrs. North, he has never been accustomed to a settled life: we have been such wanderers. But I wish he would stay more at home,

or take more interest in the estate, for I do not think it is a profitable employment to be always idling about in the sunshine: it cannot be right for anyone."

"No, indeed, Miss Cleasby; I dare say you feel responsible."

"Not exactly," she said, smiling; "a little, perhaps; but of course brothers always think they know best. It is not as if he were a girl."

And something in her tone suddenly turned Mrs. North's thoughts to her own girl, and she coloured, wondering if she had been foolish in leaving her so much to herself, and if this were meant for a warning.

"I don't think being a girl makes any difference in that way," said Mrs. North; and though she was fluttered and a little agitated, she drew herself up with an attempt at dignity. "I should trust a girl as soon as any young man—indeed sooner than most."

"Yes; only young men are supposed to be able to take care of themselves," said Augusta: and then the groom came back, and there could be no more

private conversation, and she drove off after a few more words.

But Mrs. North went back into her house disturbed and heavy at heart. What had Miss Cleasby meant? Surely it had been a warning, and if so there must be a cause for it.

And then there came another caution from another quarter to add to her trouble. Janet, too, had made her observations, and rushed to her conclusions; and she had heard them talking one day in the servants' hall at the Park: "And they do say, ma'am, as young Captain Cleasby thinks a deal on our Miss Christina; but they say as he was always a man for young ladies, and had always some fancy or other in his head." And though Mrs. North had silenced her and said something angrily about not caring to listen to gossip, she nevertheless was disturbed and dissatisfied.

It would be a real grief to her if, for the sake of a passing girlish fancy which would never come to anything, Christina should throw away her prospect

of a happy and prosperous future under the kind guardianship of such a man as Mr. Warde.

She was timid and vacillating by nature, and she dreaded any collision with Christina, but yet she thought that something must be done and some admonition given; and two days after Miss Cleasby's visit she for the first time touched upon the subject.

Christina had come in with her hands full of flowers. Captain Cleasby had given them to her, she said; he thought they might be a pleasure to her grandfather, if he did not know where they came from.

"And he is not likely to ask," said Christina, carelessly, as she put down the flowers on the parlour table and began to arrange them.

Mrs. North was sitting opposite, at her work, and now she stitched more assiduously than ever, and a cloud came over her face, but Christina did not notice it. She had met Captain Cleasby quite casually at her gate, and nothing had passed between them except a few indifferent words, and she had not sought the meeting—indeed, of late she had

avoided him—not, as she said to herself, because of him or because of herself, but because she would give no one a pretext for talking of her; and somehow she had tried to forget those words which she had overheard and to persuade herself that they had not mattered to her. So just now she was indifferent and composed, and did not know what was hanging over her.

"Why is Captain Cleasby always idling about here? I think he is a very idle young man. I cannot conceive why he is always coming and going about the house," said Mrs. North, rather nervously.

"I don't know," said Christina, bravely; but she coloured as she spoke.

"I am afraid that I do know," said Mrs. North, contradicting her former assertion. "I am afraid, Christina, that he takes more pleasure in amusing himself with young ladies than in attending to his business. How often I have told you, Christina, that we can have nothing to do with the Cleasbys: his sister says that it has always been his way. I

am sure I don't know how it is, but really I am so worried and troubled, what with your grandfather's illness, and this struggle how to live, and one thing and another, that I never thought of it before—not until his sister spoke."

"Never thought of *what* before?" said Christina, almost fiercely: and she stood up and confronted her mother, with the colour deepening in her cheeks and an indignant light in her eyes.

"Oh, Christina, don't excite yourself, now pray don't! If you had listened to me before,—though to be sure I never thought of it, and I suppose I have been to blame too; only for goodness' sake don't let your grandfather hear of it,—he cannot bear to hear of the Cleasbys."

"Don't let him hear of *what?* What is there to hear of? I don't know what you mean."

"Just this, Christina," said Mrs. North, gathering courage as her difficulties grew upon her; "just this, that people are beginning to say that there is something between you and Captain Cleasby. Janet

tells me that the servants said something to her, but I am sure it never occurred to me until his sister herself came here the other day—you know I told you she came on Wednesday with a present of game—and then she said something as if she feared you might fall into some mistake, because of course he means nothing, and perhaps——"

"Do you mean to say," said Christina, with a scornful ring in her voice, "do you mean to say that Miss Cleasby came to warn me through you against her brother? How could she do such a thing? What could you say to her? There is nothing between us."

"Of course it was a mistake; of course there could not be: but you are not just to her; she meant it very kindly. I am sure it was not her brother that she was afraid for, but you."

"And what right has she to be afraid for me? Why should she interfere?"

"Simply this, Christina; that knowing her brother as she knows him, knowing that he cares nothing

for you, she seemed to fear that you might be running into danger."

"Stop, mamma. I don't wish to hear anything more about it. Why should Miss Cleasby have come? How could she think herself justified in saying such a thing; Captain Cleasby is nothing to me; she need not have been afraid; I shall never go to their house again."

She threw back her head as she spoke, and pushing away the flowers with a rapid indignant movement, turned and left the room abruptly, leaving them all scattered in disorder upon the table. Mrs. North gave a little sigh of relief when she was gone: at least the thing had been done, and she need not fear that Christina would ever refer to it again. She did not remember that she had in truth greatly misinterpreted the part Miss Cleasby had taken in the affair; she was not even conscious that she had put her own fears and sentiments into her mouth. The only thing she regretted was Christina's impetuosity, which had disturbed her at the

moment; but it was done now, and she had nothing more to fear from it.

In the meantime Christina had gone to her room and locked her door; and now she was sitting before her dressing-table, leaning upon it heavily with both arms, and gazing absently into the mirror.

How strange a change had come over her face since she parted from her mother. She was pale now, and her mouth was firmly shut and her eyes wide open with the far-off searching look of eyes that gaze into the future. She had been angry for the moment, but now her anger was past. She had thought that the thing need not be spoken of even by herself to herself, and now she knew that others had spoken of it, and that she must face her position, and determine upon a line of conduct. She did not doubt for a moment that his sister was right; that she knew what she was saying, when, as her mother had told her, she had asserted or implied that Captain Cleasby did not—could never care for her. And had she not always known it—

except—except just for that one afternoon which would always stand out distinct from all the others which had gone before, from all which should follow after? And then, as she looked back to it, she could no longer thrust away the thought that all this stood between her and happiness. She did not know how it had been; she could not tell when it had first come upon her; but she could no longer hope to deceive herself. It was not that he was handsome, or clever, or great in any way; but now she knew that her heart had been given to him; his image rose unbidden before her mind, shutting away from her her old hopes and the future which had lain before her. She was strong and she was brave, and she faced the pain as she sat there in her solitude. Such things cannot be spoken of,—they must be borne alone! A long hour had passed, and she had not moved. She had not meant to be untrue; she had told herself when first she had feared it that it was impossible; she would not allow her fears to conquer her. But now it was no longer a question

of fear—the blow had fallen; she was not crushed—the pain had roused her to fresh strength; but yet she knew that she had been dreaming, that she was now awake, and that she could never dream that dream again—that no other September afternoon would be to her what that past September afternoon had been; that she could marry neither this man whom she loved, nor Bernard who had always loved her: and at the thought of Bernard—of his happy confidence and his near return—tears for the first time rushed to her eyes—tears of gratitude and penitence and regret.

CHAPTER XI.

JUST at this time, when Christina could no longer halt between two opinions—when she had made once for all the overwhelming discovery that she was no longer free, yet that she was no longer bound; no longer free to make a choice, no longer mistress of herself, and yet that she must break the bond between her and Bernard, because she could not hope to give him what he required,—just at this time, when, though the one thing remained sure, her mind was yet confused and wavering and uncertain, a new complication arose, and a new element was introduced into her life, which pressed a decision upon her, and made it no longer possible to hesitate as to what she should do.

Mr. Warde had of late been much at the White House. He had listened to Mrs. North's lamentations; he had tried in vain to cheer the old man, or to induce him to take the assistance he would so gladly have offered. They were sinking deeper and deeper into debt, as he well knew. The doctor was told that he was no longer required, because they could not afford the money for his visits; not even Mr. Warde was ever asked to dinner now, and he could not remember when he had seen Christina in a new dress. The daily cares and trials were beginning to tell upon her, he thought, when he noticed that she was paler and more restless and sadder. For some time past there had been in the deportment or conversation of her mother and grandfather, something to indicate that they had conceived in their secret minds the possibility of a nearer connection with him, and from the time when he observed this, he had begun to entertain the possibility of it in his own mind; and as his sense of the dreariness of her situation grew deeper, there

came upon him in more palpable form the thought that he had the power to take her away from all this. Though he could bring help in no other way, at least he could in this, if it would indeed be for her happiness as well as for his.

He was not in love with her; he had seen her faults clearly enough, but yet he was fond of her: he was pitiful and he was kind, and if it were for her happiness he would gladly have made her his wife. But, then, was it for her happiness? That was the question that he asked himself again and again without obtaining any satisfactory answer. Anything, he thought, would be better than her present life. Was she not even now losing her spirits and her youth, and the bloom of her beauty, in the wearisome round of daily vexations? He saw that she might have lightened her own burthens had she set herself to the work; but first she had been too rebellious, and now he thought she was too sad. But, then, was it not possible that some brighter fate than that he had to offer might be in store

for her? Yet how, and where? He thought of her cousin; but surely, if there had been anything more than friendship between them, her mother, his mother, everyone would have known it. And then he thought of Captain Cleasby, but only for a moment. He knew little of the intercourse that there had been. He did not see with the eyes of girls or women, nor with those of a particularly observant or sagacious man, and it did not appear to him that Captain Cleasby was likely to win a girl's affections unless under favourable circumstances.

His new subjects of reflection did not distract his mind; they did not make his teaching less energetic, nor his ministrations less conscientious; but in his solitary walks, in his lonely evenings, they came across his mind, and urged upon him decisive action.

He was thinking of it all this evening as he sat in his little parlour over the baker's shop. He was sitting there after a hard day's work, with the sort of feeling that he had earned his rest; and at the

present moment there was nothing very clerical about his appearance. He had thrown off his coat and his boots, and was leaning back in his chair, with his legs crossed, smoking a short pipe; and he was meditative and comfortable, though there was nothing at all luxurious in his surroundings.

It was a little room on the first story, with muslin blinds and a box of mignonette in the window; and there was a round walnut table, with a red cloth cover, where stood the remains of his supper, as he called it,—a jug of ale, the loaf of bread, some butter, and some cheese. There were bookshelves on each side of the fireplace, filled principally with theological works, for Mr. Warde read little on general subjects, and was quite content to see the *Times* twice a week when he went into Overton. There was a photograph of his mother over the chimney-piece in a black frame, and two prints on each side of it; and there was a large desk where he kept his sermons, on his writing table: and these were his only contributions to the adornment of the room.

Mrs. Jebb, however, the baker's wife, was a good woman, and had every desire to make her lodger comfortable, and she had provided some less serviceable but more ornamental articles of furniture—two glass vases with drops, a shepherd and shepherdess in coloured china, and a little mirror in a tarnished frame. Mr. Warde was not observant of these things, but he had, to her great distress, remorselessly ordered out a small slippery horsehair sofa, whose elegance constituted her greatest pride and glory.

"If you was to be took bad, sir," she had said, deprecating his mandate that it should be at once removed.

"But I never am bad, Mrs. Jebb," he had answered, good-humouredly; and then, before she could say anything more, he had deposited it bodily in the passage.

Yet, in spite of this, though for the moment she was a little hurt, Mrs. Jebb honoured her clergyman, and would not have exchanged him for a less active and less troublesome lodger.

Christina had been quite right when she had said how much he was liked and respected by all classes of his parishioners. He was not clever, he was not saintlike, nor, strictly speaking, a spiritual-minded man; but he was honest and true, and kind and honourable, a man who would always do his duty, and would generally see his duty clearly. He was not wavering or perplexed even this evening, but he was slowly and surely arriving at a decision upon a point which as yet his judgment had failed to decide for him.

"She shall not be hurried," he had said to himself, "and after all she can always refuse; she is under no compulsion."

He did not expect that she should have fallen in love with him, for he had not fallen in love with her; but if her heart were free, it seemed to him that he might make her happy as his wife, and if her heart were not free, why then she had only to say no.

These had been wearisome days for Christina.

First, she had her battle to fight with herself; and the thought of Bernard, so often and so unduly absent from her mind in these latter days, was ever before her now: and then troubles were coming fast upon them, and there seemed to be no way of escape. They owed money, not large sums, but still money that they had no certain prospect of being able to pay; then there was the rent, and of late Mr. North had begun to say that they must leave the White House. They could live nowhere more cheaply; but at least there would not be this obligation to be incurred with regard to Mr. Warde; and they could get some lodging near at hand, and dismiss Janet.

Christina heard it discussed with silent dismay. The White House had not been a happy home; but, nevertheless, there were many old associations which it would be hard to leave behind, and then she knew what a blow it would be to her grandfather, who was even now so weak and failing.

He sat in his loneliness and sadness and anger,

dwelling upon his misfortunes, and repelling sympathy. He liked best to be alone, he said; but if Mr. Warde came, he would see him.

"If only we had a man about the house, or if you were married, Christina," her mother said; her lament taking the same form as Mr. North's: "but here we are, and your grandfather so ill, and he may die any day for anything we know; and then, what is to become of us? I am sure I don't know. If only I thought you were cared for, I believe I should not mind anything."

"Why should you mind about me? I am not afraid."

"Because you don't know what it is to be alone in the world, Christina. You could not stand by yourself—what could you do? You don't know enough to be a governess, and if you did, your grandfather would rather you should die than work for your bread. If only you were provided for, I believe we should both die happy."

Yes, if only she were provided for; no matter

how! How dismal it sounded! And Christina took her hat and went out on the moor, less troubled, less restless, less impatient than she had been, but far more quietly despairing.

A few months since she might have told them that they need not fear for her—that at the Homestead, come what might, she would always find a shelter; but now she knew that she was shut out from this refuge far more effectually than if she had never looked to it as her future home. How could she ask Bernard to receive her as a charity beneath the roof to which he had hoped to bring her as his bride? And she too had shared in his hopes and his projects. "I shall not forget you, Bernard; I shall not change." She remembered her words, and now they came back to her sounding strange and out of season as the singing of birds in the midst of winter. For one moment there flashed across her the possibility of going back, if not in spirit at least in form, to the old footing. To outward appearance it was

all as it had been. Who could say that she had been untrue to him? Who could say that she had broken her faith? No one had known of what had been; no one knew how it was now; she need never tell; she had been able, as she thought, to hide it from everyone—why should she not hide it now and for ever? It was a thought, sudden and powerful, like a temptation. She was all alone on the moor, and she sat down and leant her head upon her hand, and looked out over the wide level expanse of heath with bewildered eyes as if seeking for counsel. It was perfectly still—a grey sky overhead, and the brown heath on all sides of her, with the lizards darting round about, and the dragon-flies flitting over the pools. There was no counsel to be had, nothing but stillness and solitude; but yet after a few minutes her forehead contracted, her eyes ceased to wander, she clenched her teeth, and rose suddenly to her feet.

"No, no, I cannot do it," she cried to herself. Whatever after sorrows she might have to endure,

that temptation was overcome, and could never assail her again. Her mind was made up, and she set out to walk home, for now she was some miles from the White House.

When she reached home she was pale, tired, and sad ; but she was no longer unnaturally agitated or restless ; one thread of her complicated and tangled life had been broken and could not be joined again. And though it had brought her much happiness which she must now put aside for ever, though there was much to regret, and a fear of coming trouble, yet was it a relief to know that she need no longer strive to interweave it with the others.

" Christina," said her mother, meeting her in the passage, " where have you been all this time ? I have wanted you very much. Your grandfather is better. I think he is dozing. Come in here, my dear ; there is no occasion for you to go to him now, and I want to have a little talk with you. Mr. Warde has been here. He saw your grand-

father, and then he came in to me. He would have liked to have seen you if you had been at home; but he said perhaps on the whole it would be better not, and then you might have time to think over it. He was very anxious that you should not be hurried; but, Christina, I think you must have guessed before now. I thought perhaps it might be so—only I was afraid of saying anything—but is it not odd that I should have said this very morning how I wished that you were married, and then this afternoon that he should come and say that he wants to marry you?"

"He wants to marry me!" said Christina, very slowly. She had been standing whilst her mother spoke, but now she sat down by the table, and leant her arms upon it, and looked at the opposite wall with eyes that had in them nothing of pleasure or pride, nor yet of fear or shame, but were simply sad and indifferent as to any new thing which she might hear.

"Oh, Christina, I do hope you are not going to be hasty. Just remember what I said to you this morning. You ought to be pleased, I do think. Just think what it will be to your grandfather to know that you are safe and well cared for, and then it will not matter what happens to us. Of course you are surprised at first, but don't look like that! Look at me, Christina, and say that you are pleased."

"Why does he want to marry me?" said Christina; and though she did turn her eyes upon her mother, she did not change colour, and her voice was as coldly indifferent as it had been before.

"He has pitied you for a long time," said Mrs. North; "he has taken such an interest in you. You have often said how much you like and respect him. He is not a very young man, to go into transports; but when you are my age, Christina, you will know that such things mean nothing. I believed in them once, and what has

my life been? Yours will be very different, for your happiness will be based, not upon a passing fancy for a pretty face, but upon the enduring affection of an honourable man."

"It is very kind of him," said Christina, more softly; and there was nothing contemptuous or ironical in her tone.

"Yes, it is kind, Christina. You can hardly judge how kind it is now, for you don't understand the burthens of married life. He has spoken to your grandfather, and you can hardly imagine what a change it has made to him. You shall not be hurried, Christina; you shall have time to think: we will not talk of it any more to-night; but you will remember all that I have said, Christina; and I believe, my child, that you will not disappoint us. Oh, Christina, I would do much to save you from such a life as mine has been!"

There were tears in her eyes as she kissed her child, and they went to Christina's heart: she thought of them more than of her mother's words;

and she thought of the pleading look which her grandfather had given her when she wished him good-night. It was a look of entreaty, so opposed to his usual manner, that it could hardly fail to make an impression.

CHAPTER XII.

SHE sat thinking of it all for many hours of the night. Here at last was a way of escape,—escape from confession and promises, and from herself. How could she meet Bernard's eyes, and let him think that it was all as it had been? Yet how could she tell him—how could she let him guess what had wrought the change? With Mr. Warde it was otherwise: he was kind, he was pitiful, and he wished to marry her, but she knew that she would not have to shrink from a love which she could not return. He wished to make her his wife; she must consent, and then all would be over, and no more questions would be asked. He would be content with what she had to give. If he had loved her, she could not

have done it; but he did not love her, so there was nothing which need make her fear,—nothing except the recollections to which she would not listen, and the longings which had died, she thought, for ever within her.

Youth appears to be self-sacrificing, because it cannot and will not count the cost: like Esau, it stretches out its hand for the mess of pottage and lets the birthright go. In spite of her assurance, Christina had not counted the cost: she thought of the present effort for which she had the strength: she thought of the present evil from which she would be freed; but she did not look on to the long years which lay before her, which must know nothing of the hopes of her youth and the dreams of her girlhood, when all the happiness she would know would be the gift of a kind man, who, because he was kind, desired to make her happy. She did not think of this, but she thought much of the present sacrifice and the present deliverance. By this act she would bring sunshine into the dreary house; she

would call forth an unwonted song of thanksgiving from her mother's heart: she would free her grandfather from the dishonour which was pressing so heavily upon him. Why should she not do it? Was it not right? Was it not her duty? And as for herself, what did it matter?

Yet the next morning, when they came and told her that he was there awaiting her answer, she turned cold, and for a minute felt as if she could not do it.

"I am coming," she said, and did not stir, but sat rigidly upright upon the side of her bed, as if turned into stone. The minutes seemed long before she went down to the front parlour where he was waiting. She had been able to smile at her mother and grandfather when she told them what answer she would make him; she had smiled, though she was quiet and composed, when they had blessed her for the relief she was about to bring; but now she stood up, and her face was pale, and her mouth firmly set, and her hands cold; and she did not turn to look in the glass or smooth back the tumbled

hair from her face, but went down, stepping steadily with immoveable composure, just as she was, in her morning cotton gown: and she was going thus to meet the man who was to be her husband.

"You are willing?" he said, holding out his hand with a kind smile, and clasping hers firmly as he spoke.

And at that moment all her courage returned; she knew that he would not trouble her with protestations or promises or inquiries; he would be, now as ever, kind, straightforward, and honest.

"Yes, I am willing," she said, gravely; and then he dropped her hand, as if the compact had been made and there was nothing further to be done but to discuss the conditions. It had been done, and for the moment the sense of the irrevocable was a relief to Christina, and she sat down, quiet and prepared to listen to anything further that he might have to say.

"I am a great deal older than you, Christina," he said, "and you must not expect me to behave as if

I were twenty. I have thought of this for a long time, and my greatest desire is to make you happy. You have had a hard time, my dear, but now I trust that it is over."

"Thank you," said Christina; and then she could say nothing more.

"We cannot be married at once, I am afraid," he went on in a serious, deliberate tone; "I must get a little house somewhere. Your mother wants me to come here, but I could not live so far from my work. I hope you will take an interest in it too, Christina."

"I will try," said Christina. She did not laugh, or even smile, or look rebellious or indignant at the bare thought of parish work. She was strangely quiet, and she meant to accept it all, as she sat there listening to his plans,—plans full of kindness and large-heartedness for her grandfather's comfort, and the good of his flock, and her own happiness.

And then came a summons to him to the death-bed of a parishioner, and he hurried off, saying that

she would not see him again that day, he had so many things that must be attended to; and she heard him with relief and gratitude,—she need not fear that his attentions would be those of a lover.

"Then good-bye till to-morrow," she said, and smiled at him for the first time as he hurriedly took his leave.

She stood at the door as he strode away, and just at that moment the Park gates were thrown open, and Captain Cleasby drove past. He bowed as he caught sight of Christina, but she went back quickly into the house, her heart beating fast, no longer with hope or fear or longing, but with a kind of fierce pleasure in the strength of her self-renunciation.

At this time it seemed to Christina that her fate was irrevocably sealed. She could not marry the man she loved,—everything made it impossible. She had been bound to Bernard, and now she knew that she could never, with a clear conscience, become his wife; she knew that she could not look into his face and let him think that there had been no

change: and so it was that she had engaged herself to a kind and honest man, who asked for no more than she could give, and who desired to make her happy. She thought no more of Captain Cleasby; — it had been a dream, and she seemed to herself to be able now to banish the remembrance of it and to scorn the past. It had been a mad infatuation, and now that she had put it from her she almost despised herself for it. It even appeared hard that it should have come to destroy her prospect of happiness, to make her break her promises, and prove false to him who, in his confident lightheartedness, had believed in her always.

She had thought at first that she would write and let Bernard know how it was; but now she found that it was impossible to write to him. How could she put into words all the complicated motives which had actuated her? yet how could she tell him the bare fact? His mother knew, and she would write.

Yet at this time it was not of herself that she was thinking, nor of her past as connected with

Captain Cleasby, still less of her future as connected with Mr. Warde,—but of Bernard: of the days long past when they had been so happy together; of her promises, and his words, and their last parting. Then when she knew that his mother had written, she calculated the time, and thought when and how he would get the letter. It would be by an early post, and she thought of him coming down to his solitary breakfast, full of his projects and his work, energetic and eager, with the thought of her and of his return home running through his life and brightening it all. She pictured him with his sunny smile and boyish ways, winning the hearts of all who knew him; and then a vision came before her and returned again and again. She saw him fling down the letter; she saw him grow pale and stern, yet bewildered, and passionately incredulous; she thought of him in his first hours of uncertainty, and during the days which must follow; and always his reproachful eyes were looking into hers.

Sometimes it seemed that she had paid too dearly for what she had gained—for her grandfather's satisfied pride, and for her mother's contentment; but yet was it not better so than that she should have gone to Bernard with a lie upon her lips? She had been capable of much wrong, but this she could not do.

But if only they need not meet! It would be better for both that they should not meet just now. Again and again in the middle of her pain this desire came back, and she thought, if only Bernard were not coming home! if only his return could be postponed! if only she need not meet his just resentment until all was to his eyes as irrevocable as she felt it to be—until she was Mr. Warde's wife, and shut off from him for ever! Then, she thought, she could bear it: but now it was hard, and every day she shrank more and more from the meeting, as every day brought it nearer.

Her aunt had congratulated her very gravely—

Christina could not but fear that she had her suspicions—and she said, with emphasis, that after all Bernard might not come home just at present.

Christina, too, thought that he might not come, and the thought gave her new hope and courage. Her grandfather was better again: he sat over his books in his study, but he was less irritable than he had been, and it was evident that a load had been taken off his mind. And Christina meant to do her duty and to leave all the rest behind her. She went to the schools by Mr. Warde's desire, and she tried to interest herself in parish work. Sometimes she thought it would be easy and natural; it was only just at first that it was so irksome and so hard; it was only just at first that it was so impossible to keep her mind from wandering back to the past, and from looking to what might have been. She did not care much for people's opinion, but yet it was a pleasure to her to know how much happiness this one act of self-renunciation had brought to others: she read

it in her grandfather's voice and her mother's eyes. Only her aunt Margaret looked coldly upon her, and she did not blame her openly.

In truth, Mrs. Oswestry was astonished at her own spontaneous feeling of indignation; but she had guessed that her boy had set his heart upon this thing, and she felt unreasonably injured. She did not admire Christina or love her as she would have desired to love and admire her daughter-in-law: she knew well enough that Bernard was at present in no position to marry; she knew that an attachment between him and Christina would have appeared preposterous and absurd to her father, and that it would have been hard to reconcile herself to it; and yet, in spite of all this, she felt that Christina was doing her an injury in engaging herself to another man: and if indeed it was as she had once supposed, she was sacrificing her own truth for the sake of a "suitable" marriage.

"You have my best wishes," she said, about a

week after Mr. Warde's proposal, when Christina had for the first time gone to her house—a duty which she had shrunk from for the first few days. "I hope, Christina, that you will do your duty in your own state of life, and be a blessing to your husband. I have written to Bernard, for I hardly know when he may be at home. He spoke of some work which might fall to him, if he stayed, when he wrote last," said Mrs. Oswestry, rather proudly; for at least Christina should not know that she could have anything to do with the change in Bernard's plans.

And Christina turned away, feeling that she had no longer a right to seek to know more. Once she had taken so close an interest in all his doings, but now her remorse made her unwilling unnecessarily to pronounce his name. She went away with an undefined consciousness of her aunt's displeasure, thrusting away all regrets. After all, he was not coming; and after a time it would be different, and she would no longer fear to meet him.

Then, just as she had, as it were, freed herself from her most pressing difficulty; just as she was turning again to her duty, and stifling the old yearnings; just when the consciousness of her present position and her separation from the past was strongest within her,—at this moment she was suddenly recalled to it by an unexpected sight; once more she was the Christina of old times, no longer passive and self-controlled and resolute, but trembling and flushing and carried out of herself; she had turned a sharp corner in the shady lane where the branches were so wide and tall that they almost met over her head, and as she turned and looked up she started and gave a cry; for Bernard was close before her, coming towards her with long strides.

Then there was no longer any hope; he had come back on receiving the news; he had not stayed away as she had vainly hoped. For one moment she imagined that there was yet a respite in store for her; for a moment she hoped that she was yet

safe from his reproaches; but when she looked at him, she hoped no longer.

He had been walking fast, and his face was a little flushed, and his hair disordered, as was natural; but it was not his haste which made his eyes so eager, and his voice so highly strung.

"It is not true, Christina!" and he took her hands in his and pressed them hard as she stood a little away from him leaning against a bank.

Very slowly Christina raised her eyes to his face; she would not lower them before him, but yet it was very hard.

"Is it true, Christina?" and then in the long silence which followed he waited for her answer.

"Yes, it is true, Bernard," she said at last, speaking distinctly, yet as if each word had been wrung from her.

Then he dropped her hands and drew back; but yet his eyes were upon her, and when he spoke, every word came to her, clear and distinct in the autumn stillness.

"And I believed in you, Christina; I believed in you until this moment. I could not think it was true—I would not trust the letter—I would not have trusted an angel if he had said that you were false: and now I can hardly believe it when you tell me so yourself. You were pledged to me, Christina, though only we knew of it. You would have been free if you had asked for freedom, but you had said you would not change, and I trusted you. You never told me you had changed until you were the promised wife of another man; you left me to hear the news as I might. Oh, Christina, I would bear anything to know you to be once more as true as I thought you! If you wished to be free, why did you not say so?"

He paused, but she made no answer. What answer could she make? Was it not all true? and how could she meet him with excuses?

"If you had loved him, I could have forgiven you," he continued; "then I could have understood

it better; but you cannot tell me that you love him, Christina—can you say that you do?"

"I have been very wrong; I have done very wrong by you; but you have no right—no one has any right now to interfere between him and me. He is content to take what I can give; no one else can come between us." She spoke proudly and lifted up her head, and made a movement as if to pass on, but Bernard stood in her path.

"The future is your own," he said; "but the past, Christina, you cannot so easily get rid of, and the past you must divide with me. Think of your promises, and of how you have kept them; think of your words which cannot be forgotten. No one will ever know of them; no one will know of what has been; but *we* cannot forget. You may think you can, but you cannot. I must remember, though I would gladly forget. I must remember the old times and the happy days, and your past promises, even as I must remember your falsehood and broken faith."

"Let me go, Bernard. It can do no good to say hard words about me. If we cannot forget the past, at least we can be silent."

"No, Christina, I will not let you go; I will speak now, and for the last time. It is better that you should know what you have done. I do not remember when I first began to love you—it was so long ago," he said, and his voice faltered with tenderness and regret in the midst of his reproachful indignation, at the remembrance of their childish days. "I have loved you all my life; I had always hoped, and a year ago last August I told you what I hoped, and when I went away you gave me your promise and your pledge. We could not hope to marry at once, but I was content to wait. I was content to seek no further assurance, because, Christina, I trusted you—trusted you entirely: and how have you repaid my trust? You were not frightened or hurried; you were not in love; but yet, for the sake of money and position, or, if you like it better, for the sake of pleasing your relations, you engaged

yourself to marry another man; and this when I knew nothing of the change—when I was still happy and trusting! I was still to hear of it as if it could not concern me—as if I had nothing to do with it. It is not only that you have broken your faith, but everything I believed in was a lie; you never cared for me, or you could not have done it. It is over now, Christina; you can go if you like. I have said all I have to say, and nothing can bring back the past."

He ceased, and now Christina raised her eyes, and looked at him through her tears. It was not that she loved him; it was not that she did not feel his words to be cruel and hard; but yet, though she would not have brought back his love, she yearned for the old friendship. It was not his words which had brought the rush of tears to her eyes; she was not so much moved by him, as he stood before her now, pale and fierce, and passionately reproachful, as she was moved by the recollection of his looks and words when they had been together

last: she remembered the parting, and knew that that was all of the past, and could not be brought back.

"Is there no forgiveness possible?" she said, mournfully.

"How can there be? No, Christina. Not because my hopes are gone, not because of my grief and disappointment,—I could have forgiven you all that; but I cannot forgive you, for you were false when I thought you true. Oh, Christina, why did you do it?" he cried in his misery, with sudden relenting: and then he turned away that she might not see his face, and strode down the green lane towards his home.

But long after he had passed from her sight Christina stood still where he had left her, leaning against the bank, with her hands hanging down. She had known that he would reproach her; she had known that he would give way to his impulse; but she had not known what form her past would take, seen by the light of his words. And now

there was no way of escape, and all at once their positions had undergone a complete change. Until now she had always stood, as it were, a little above him; he had always looked up to her, even in her phases of rebelliousness and injustice and discontent; he had never blamed her; he had changed with her varying moods, and been happy only in her presence: and now it was she who would have pleaded to him if she might; it was she who stood convicted before him, and could not even stand upon her own defence. She felt instinctively that she could not so have spoken had she been in his place: she would have suffered in silence, too proud to be reproachful or indignant: but he was still a boy, impetuous and ungoverned in his passion and his sorrow. Oh, why had she brought it upon him! How happy and confident he had been—so beautiful and so gay, that it seemed as if nothing but a passing cloud could overshadow his life; and she remembered that this was not like a disappointment arising from a passing fancy, or even like a disappointment of

months or years: it was quite true, she knew, that he had thought of it ever since he could remember, that it had dwelt with him always, and that for more than a year she had been his promised wife. Now there was nothing more to be said; he would not speak to her again, and she need not fear that her secret would be discovered; and yet she longed for a word of forgiveness, for the old proud smile with which he had been used to look upon her. It was not regret for a lover who had changed; it was rather like the sorrow of a sister whose brother turns from her, and must henceforth be a stranger. She would so gladly have said, "Forgive me, Bernard," if only he could have been content to take what she could give; his words had saddened and oppressed her without awakening any resentment; she knew that he could not forget them, nor the vehement indignation from which they had sprung.

All this time she thought rather of him than of herself, and not even now did she wish to free herself from Mr. Warde. Since she had seen Bernard, the

impossibility of deceiving him was even stronger within her than it had been; and as to herself, it seemed as if it no longer mattered what became of her; or at least she would now do her duty, and put everything else aside.

Gradually, as she stood there, again fighting the battle with herself in the shady lane, a stillness came over her spirit, and she thought that it was victory. It was partly a revulsion from the passionate excitement of the last hour; it was partly physical weariness; partly the effect of the peacefulness around her.

The dumb, unexpectant calm of autumn hung over everything; the silence of resignation where grief is hushed and hope has no place; the peace of departing souls who have said their last farewell; the death-bed of the dying year.

And as Christina turned homewards, she too thought that she had said her last farewell to the troubled waters upon which she had been tossing, and was passing into the region of calms. Thus

it is that we think ourselves strong when we are weakest, and imagine that we can in one hour, by an effort of the will, shut the doors for ever against the passions and the impulses of the past. Christina thought herself secure, and in the midst of her sadness and weariness the sense of security was not nothing—was even much.

Bernard was changed, it was true, yet he did not shun her. Perhaps his mother knew that he suffered, but he spoke to no one; and at the White House, with the exception of Christina, they knew nothing of the change. He came and sat with his grandfather; he listened patiently to his aunt: and if there was a change they did not notice it. Mrs. North said one day she thought he had grown taller; Christina knew that he was only thinner and paler. He said that he could not remain long at home; he had work offered him elsewhere, and he smiled when they congratulated him upon his prosperity; and no one but Christina guessed why he was unwilling to remain in the neighbourhood.

She honoured him for his reticence, and was grateful to him for a self-control so foreign to his nature, and yet she still yearned for a word or look to say that she was forgiven; but though he was outwardly the same when others were by, she knew that there was a difference, wide as the world, and, since that day in the lane, she had never seen him alone.

One afternoon she had walked over with a message to her aunt Margaret. Mrs. Oswestry was busy with a poor woman, but she would be down in a few minutes, the servant said, if Miss Christina would wait in the drawing-room.

Christina walked in unannounced, wondering within herself whether Bernard was at home; and then she suddenly stopped, perceiving that he was in the room; but he was not conscious of her presence.

He had flung himself down on the sofa close to the window, and looked as if he had suddenly fallen asleep. His cap lay on the floor, and his eyes were shut, and his fair hair was tumbled about his pale face. He was no longer the bright-faced boy he

had been; but though he was altered, he was handsomer than he had ever been before.

Christina stood looking down at him, and tears rose in her eyes. She must speak to him now that they were alone; it would be better for them both that some words of forgiveness should be spoken.

"Bernard!" she said gently. He stirred uneasily and smiled in his sleep. "Bernard!" she said again, and this time the smile faded as he opened his eyes upon her and rose to his feet.

"I have wakened you," she said.

"Yes, my head aches," he said gloomily, as if in explanation. "Are you waiting for my mother?"

"Yes. They have told her; she is coming. Oh, Bernard, you are not going away?"

"Why not? I have nothing to say to you, Christina. I have said all I have to say,—perhaps I should have done better to leave it unsaid: it is all over. You are going to marry this man, and then perhaps we may be friends again,—but not now."

"Bernard, can you never forgive me? We have been together all our lives, and is it to cease for ever because of this one wrong that I have done you?"

"Yes, Christina, because you do not love him. If you had loved him, I could have forgiven you everything. I do not warn you because I love you still—all that is past—but do not think that you will be happy because he is kind and good."

There was something of scorn in his voice, and Christina was too proud to plead again. She got up to greet her aunt, with the colour flushing in her cheeks and the old flash in her eyes; and when she took her solitary way home across the heath after some hours passed with Mrs. Oswestry, something of indignation was mingled with her pity and her desire for forgiveness, and her regret for what she had done.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE news of Christina's engagement to Mr. Warde had not been without its effect upon his parishioners and upon the little world of Overton; and so far from pitying her, they were disposed to think that he might have done better, and that he was throwing himself away upon a girl of whom no one knew anything except that she was pretty, and old North's granddaughter, and had not a penny in the world. The clergyman, they thought, might have chosen some one older and better able to share his pastoral labours; for, to be sure, Christina knew little of parish duties, and was not even very regular in her attendance at church.

But if these were the views entertained for the most part by the Overton public, there was one person in whose eyes the affair took a very different aspect.

Captain Cleasby had heard of it quite casually; it was borne in upon him, as the news which lies nearest to our hearts is so often borne in upon us, by the careless words of an acquaintance in whose mouth it was but an unimportant bit of gossip, and Captain Cleasby gave no sign that it mattered anything to him. He smiled and said something of Christina's beauty and the parson's good luck, and then passed on to other things: but he went home grave and preoccupied, and sauntered into the drawing-room with his hands thrust into his pockets and a cloud over his brow.

He did not speak of it at once, but went to the pianoforte, playing at intervals and talking to his sister; and it was not till some time had been passed in this way that he said—

"By the way, Augusta, I have news for you: your parson is going to marry Christina."

"Christina North!" exclaimed Augusta: and she sat upright and laid down her book. "Nonsense, Walter; who told you so?"

"Gregson told me; but it appears it is an old story now. I only hope they haven't been worrying the poor child's life out of her! I can't conceive what possesses her; but at least you will be pleased to find your fears were groundless. It is only in your partial eyes that I am this irresistible and all-powerful rival to other men."

He spoke lightly, yet there was an undercurrent of vexation beneath his words, which was sufficiently apparent if his sister had been at leisure to perceive it; but she was busied with her own thoughts. She remembered her own conjectures and what had led to them; she remembered with something of fear and trembling the suspicions she had had, and the warning she had given, and she was startled and perplexed. Yet she would not share her thoughts and perplexities with her brother.

"I am very glad," she said, after that momentary

conference with herself. "He is a man I thoroughly admire and respect. He will do his best to make her happy. It will be a great change from the dismal life she has led at home."

"Where at least she was free!" said Captain Cleasby: and he got up and walked to the window. "And to marry that ordinary broad-shouldered parson! I consider it very presumptuous of him to have asked her."

"I think you have taken an absurd view of it, Walter. What could she expect more? And Mr. Warde is not an ordinary man. His straightforward goodness and unselfish devotion are not ordinary. I think Christina is very fortunate, and I do trust, Walter, that if you meet her you will do nothing to unsettle her mind."

"So I am still dangerous, am I?" said Captain Cleasby. "I should have thought that this might have reassured you, Gusty; but I am still to be the villain of the piece, and come in at the end to shatter your hero's happiness. And you don't

seem to understand her either: she is not a soft little girl to be so easily won. Depend upon it, if she cares, she will stick to it and hold her own against the world. If she doesn't care, then it's a different thing."

"Why are you sceptical about it? Why should she not care for him?"

"It don't seem natural," said Captain Cleasby: and after that he went away to dress for dinner; and when they met again, as if by mutual consent, they kept clear of the subject.

Augusta was not exactly talkative, but yet it was not usual that there should be any lack of conversation during their *tête-à-tête* meals. They had both of them somewhat discursive minds, and they were apt to interchange fancies, and argue, and discuss the books they had read and the questions of the day; but this evening they were both silent and preoccupied, and Miss Cleasby, leaning one arm on the table, drew lines on the table-cloth, and Walter was moody and played with his terriers,

and fed them under the table, though this was an attention to which they were unaccustomed.

"Walter," said Miss Cleasby, rousing herself after the servants had left the room, "I had a note from Uncle Robert this morning: he wants to know what we are doing about staying on here, and whether he shall come and pay us a visit. He says he rather expected to hear from you before this, but he supposes you are in communication with Mr. Waltham,—and there is something about his claim which I don't quite understand; and he says you are not to hurry yourself—I don't quite know what about. I meant to show you the letter, but you went out so soon after breakfast."

"If there is a thing I hate, it is hearing a letter second-hand,—it is bad enough when one has to read it," said Captain Cleasby, crossly. "If he wants an answer, he should write to me. Of course he can come, if he likes it; but when you write, just say that you don't know anything about business, and you have nothing to do with it. How I detest

relations who think they have a right to meddle in all your private affairs, just because they belong to what they call 'the family.'"

"Yes,—but, Walter, I do think you might be a little more communicative. You will be getting us into a scrape some day; and I suppose Uncle Robert has experience. Would it not be as well to have his advice if you are in any difficulty? I have been wanting for some days to talk to you about the money arrangements."

"And those, my dear Augusta, are precisely the subjects upon which I do *not* want to talk to you," said Captain Cleasby: and he stood up and emptied his glass of wine. "I am going to have my cigar outside. Shut the window if it grows cold; I shall be back for tea:" and he took up his hat.

His sister, though she was not sensitive, was a little hurt, rather at his manner than his speech; and she said no more, while he lighted his cigar, standing just outside the window, and then stepped out into the garden without further words.

Sudden announcements often take some little time to make themselves fully felt. But from the first, Captain Cleasby was disturbed more than he chose to show, by the announcement which he had received. He had not, as people say, "meant anything" when he had sought Christina, taking pleasure in her freshness and originality and the charm of her beauty; but now it did seem to him as if he had sustained a loss, and as if Mr. Warde was doing her an injury in claiming all this for his own. If she had been making what he would have considered a good marriage, he would have felt differently; but he did feel that she was throwing herself away. Why should this man—this commonplace parson—take such a wife to himself? It was unnatural, it was preposterous, and it made him indignant. And, added to all this, there was something which touched him much more nearly; there was a more personal and individual side to the question: he had not thought of the future, but yet his admiration of Christina was not merely

admiration of a pretty face; it was not merely pleasure in the society of an attractive girl—this was a pleasure by no means rare to him, for he was fond of feminine companionship, and popular with women: but though all this had helped to make their intercourse what it had been, there was something in Christina which had moved him much more deeply. Perhaps it was the strength of her suppressed passion which unconsciously had swayed him; perhaps it was her frank unconsciousness; perhaps it was her sudden, vivid smile,—or it might be all these things together; but she came back to his mind, and, uncalled for, she stood before him as he had seen her first since her childhood; stepping back in the flickering firelight and looking at him with startled curiosity. No other image would ever efface hers; he had never seen anyone like her before; there *was* no one like her; it was nonsense to call her pretty; she was splendid in her dark, flashing, brilliant beauty.

And yet he was not a man to interfere if she

was happy; he was not actively selfish, and he had not the desire of possession strong within him. If she were to enjoy happiness, he was content that it should be the gift of another man—only not such a man as Mr. Warde; and if she were not to be happy, then it was a mistake from beginning to end.

"Why should girls be in such a hurry to marry?" he said to himself; and then he bethought him that it might not have been altogether her doing. He should like, he thought, to see her once more alone, and judge for himself how matters stood. He had no strong sense of rectitude or principle; but yet, if she were willing to marry this man, he would not interfere, he would do nothing to prevent it.

He did not go to the White House, for there he would in all probability see her only when others were present; but he lingered about the lanes, and on the heath, in hopes of a chance meeting; and as it was delayed from day to day, his desire for it became more confirmed. She had been so

constant in her comings and goings, that he had thought he could not fail to meet her, but her habits seemed to have changed; she no longer loitered on the moor in the afternoons, nor walked to the village, as she had been used to do, talking to the women at the cottage-doors, and playing with the children. Captain Cleasby knew her haunts, yet this week he only once caught sight of her, and then her mother was with her. He did not know that, in unceasing occupation within doors, Christina was striving to banish her recollections and stifle her regrets.

As it happened, it was when he was not thinking of a meeting that at last he saw her again. He had loitered out one morning after breakfast, with a cigar and a bundle of unopened letters, and he was walking along the road towards Overton, leisurely reading them as he went, when, lifting his eyes, he caught sight of Christina coming out of the garden gate.

She paused for a moment, and made a movement

backwards; then, apparently changing her mind, and as if she would not allow herself to be turned out of her path, she came to meet him as he took off his hat and threw away his cigar. To both it was a moment which for days past had been the centre of their thoughts; and yet they met as casual acquaintances, with courteous indifference, as if they feared to make any acknowledgment or confession to themselves or each other. As for Captain Cleasby, he was a man of the world, and his manners were always perfect; and Christina had brought the overwhelming consciousness of her position and the whole force of her pride and independence to help her now. His sister had warned her, but she would prove that she had no right to warn her; she would prove to him and to herself that he had nothing to do with her or with what she had done. And yet she knew, she felt as she saw him again, that he had had everything to do with it; that had it not been for him and for the certainty which his sister's words had given her,

and for the rush of shame which had overpowered her,—had it not been for all this, she had not now been Mr. Warde's promised wife. Nothing should make her go back; that was done, and for ever; but for the first time, even as Captain Cleasby spoke, a desire of escape rose within her, which was stronger than her pride and her duty and her spirit of self-sacrifice. And yet his words were those of a friendly acquaintance, and had no special significance.

"I hear I have to congratulate you, or rather to congratulate Mr. Warde," said Captain Cleasby. There was not much of congratulation in his voice, but yet there was nothing of regret or dismay; he spoke as if she would expect him to say something, and as if he were discharging a social duty, not pleasant, but yet not distasteful to him.

"Yes," said Christina, bravely: and she threw back her head, and looked him full in the face. But she could not smile as she spoke, nor could she get beyond the one word, and, though she did

not know it, after that one word she could no longer deceive him altogether.

It was not that she was confused, or that there was any regret apparent, but Captain Cleasby knew her well enough to know that this was not the way in which she would have spoken if she had been going to marry the man she loved. He did not know more as yet; but of this he was assured, that she was not in love with Mr. Warde. Still, she might be doing it with her eyes open; she might have made a willing choice, and if so, it might be better to leave it as it was; only first he would try her further.

"These things always take one by surprise," he said. "It rather took away my breath at first: I know so little of him, but everyone unites to sing his praise."

"He is everything that is best and kindest," said Christina; but she spoke with an effort, and she dared not look at him again.

"So you will spend your life here; you will

always be a neighbour of ours," he said: "and when you are no longer afraid of vexing your grandfather, I hope you will not be so unwilling to come to the Park."

She was growing cold with the force she was putting upon herself, and the battle she was fighting, but yet she would not give in. But oh, if only he would talk of something else—if only he would not set her future thus before her.

"I suppose your plans are undecided as yet?" he continued. "I have not seen Mr. Warde for some days, but he is always busy with his schools or his poor people or something or other. I am afraid such things have not been much in your line?"

"Not yet," said Christina; but her voice sounded strange, and she put up her hands to her face with a sudden movement, for it seemed that the white road upon which the sun was shining dazzled her as she looked at it.

"Come on to the moor; the sun is too much for

you," he said gently: and he followed, whilst she walked on as if in a dream. They were walking, as they had often walked before, across the heath in the sunny freshness of the morning: the mist was still lying in the hollow, the grass was still wet with dew, the birds were wheeling over their heads, the lizards darting, and the grasshoppers chirruping at their feet; and in the pause which had followed his last words, Christina had once more gathered up her strength and would not be vanquished.

"People can always do what has to be done," she said. "I suppose I shall learn my duties in time; it is only that I am not accustomed to it."

There was a momentary silence; and when by an effort she turned her eyes upon him, she saw that he was smiling strangely at her.

"Is it only that you are not accustomed to it?' he said; "or is it not rather that you cannot accustom yourself to it? Oh, Christina, you do not know how to deceive! You deceive no one

but yourself, and you think no one can see that you are struggling to be free—that you are restless and unhappy."

"I am happy," she said in her dread, facing him as she spoke.

"It is easier to say so than to seem so. It is a mockery to say that you are happy. Is this the first warning you have had? Has no one else seen —has no one spoken to you?"

"Why do you speak of it?" said Christina. "You should say nothing to me that he might not hear. I have promised to marry him, and now I will not talk about it with you. I have promised to be his wife, and you have nothing to do with it."

They had reached the same hollow between the hills where they had met for the first time alone. The leaves were rustling and falling about them, and lying crisp and yellow on the ground, and the bracken crackled beneath their feet. It had been early spring when they stood there first, and now it was September, and everything was changed.

Christina stood still, as if to give him his dismissal; the colour had come into her cheeks at her last words, and she had once more grasped her fate and fortified herself in her pride and independence.

"Have I nothing to do with it? Do you think that I would speak now if I had nothing more to say? Is it possible, Christina, that you do not know what it is?"

Then, in spite of everything, though she was strong, her courage deserted her. She could no longer hope to deceive him: as she stood there in the flickering sunlight he saw her grow pale, and she trembled and put out her hand, leaning against a young birch-tree to steady herself.

"There is nothing to make you afraid," he said; "it has not been your fault, and I thought only of the moment, and did not look on till they told me you were going to be married to another man. I think you made me forget the future."

"Not now—not when it is too late," she cried.

It had come at last, this thing that might have been the joy and crown of her life, and what was it now? Only one bewildering incredible note of sweetness jarring with that monotonous undertone,—that dull grave chant to which henceforth her life must be set. She felt its inharmoniousness; that string must be broken, that note must be silenced; she would shut her ears to its vibration even whilst she recognized, alas! with how keen a longing, its loveliness and power. She was still leaning against the tree, and her heart beat in throbs, but she had turned away from Captain Cleasby, and at first was hardly conscious of the words he said,—but he for his part was not too much agitated to plead his cause gracefully and well.

"What made you do it? Why did you not trust me?"

What had there been to make her trust? Nothing: she knew it, though she did not say it. It was true, as he had said, that he had not thought of the future: perhaps he would never have thought of it

in the way he was thinking of it now, had it not been for Mr. Warde.

"But it is not too late, Christina," he continued. "Listen to me one moment: you have been led into this engagement, but you cannot look at me and say that must divide us. It *cannot*, Christina; it is not too late. Trust to me when I tell you it is so. You have never been afraid of me before. Look at me now, Christina, and then I ask no words, no promise—nothing more."

He was standing close to her now, waiting for his answer, but though he had kept his self-possession it seemed to him that he had waited a long time, and the silence had grown oppressive, before she made a slight movement and he thought that she was about to speak.

"Tell me what it is, Christina," he said, speaking very gently: "is it because of this—because you think yourself bound? But surely it cannot be your duty to keep a promise in the letter when you can no longer keep it in the spirit. If you

would not refuse me, putting this altogether out of the question, then you have no right to refuse me now. If this is the only thing that stands in the way, you have no right to refuse me."

Then at last Christina slowly turned towards him, and he met her eyes—bright, startled eyes, still wet with tears; but her low answer was given unfalteringly.

"And if I had not been bound, still I should have told you that it could never be."

"But why, Christina?" he said: and now he had taken one of her hands in his. "Won't you tell me why? Could you never—don't you care for me?"

"It is not that," said Christina: and she drew back her hand, but did not move away from him, looking straight at him as she spoke, with sad simplicity. "No, it is not that. It is you yourself that stand in the way. I know that you believe what you are saying. You have been sorry for me: perhaps you are right; perhaps I was wrong in thinking that I could be happy in the way I

had chosen. You have shown me that, and now you can do no more. It is not in your power."

"Why do you say that it is not in my power? Won't you let me try?"

"I know that you would *try*," she said.

Was it that he would not or that he could not understand? Did he imagine that this was all that she wanted? or had he consciously made the attempt and failed to give her what she would have asked? She knew that he did not love her as she loved him; that would have made no difference; but she could not take pity and friendship from him, and let him call it love: it was love that she had wanted, and he did not understand.

If he had been vehement and impassioned, she would have turned from him; she would have felt instinctively that he was professing more than he felt. This he had not done, he had not tried to deceive her, but had he not deceived himself?

"Yes, you would try," she repeated; "but you are wrong in thinking that you could; as I said, it is

not in your power. You will forget all this:" and then a strange melancholy smile stole out over her face. "Don't you see, it is just this—that you do not care."

"I do care," he said; "I cannot forget."

There was a new tone in his voice: he did not himself know what it meant. It was not the words which touched Christina. To other ears it is a commonplace song which the thrush sings in the springtime when he woos his mate: she alone knows what it means, she to whom he sings of love, and in the autumnal stillness of the wood on the moor those words might have fallen unheeded on other ears, but they have thrilled in one girl's heart, and will sound on in it for ever.

"You believe me, Christina?" he said, as he clasped her hands in his, and did not wait for an answer.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHRISTINA was triumphant and penitent, strangely happy and yet regretful, more than content with what she had gained, yet with a natural shrinking from the consequences of that gain; sometimes she was all these things by turns, sometimes it seemed that she was all these things at once.

She came out from her grandfather's presence on that evening with a white, set face. He was powerless now, and he knew it, and did not attempt to exercise authority; but he was bitter and fierce in his disappointment; for he could not without a mortal wound to his pride accept from Captain Cleasby the help he had looked for from Mr. Warde; and though Christina had held her own against him, there had been a struggle, and the victory had not brought

her peace. Then her mother's first impulse of incredulity had to be overcome, and her weak lamentations heard, not once, but many times.

"You will not be happy with him, Christina," she had said. "Of course you can do as you please, but do not think you will be happy. He loves you now, perhaps; but all that passes away, and some day you will look back and regret what you might have been. He has a fancy for the moment; perhaps he would never have had it but for the obstacles raised in his path. All his friends will look down upon you, and some day he may learn to see with their eyes. It may seem cruel now, but I must warn you before it is too late."

"It *is* too late," said Christina: and she too looked on, as she spoke, to the future which her mother had pictured, but yet she smiled, as if she did not know what it was to be afraid. "It *is* too late. I can never go back again. I have been very wrong, but not in this, and I will not give this up; I could not; he would not let me."

"You are doing it on your own responsibility then, Christina. Do not say that you were not warned. But of what use are warnings? I had had warnings, but I would not listen until the time for them was passed. You must see Mr. Warde, of course, and I think you ought to let him know at once."

"He does know," said Christina; "I wrote to him."

Yes, that afternoon she had written to tell him that it must all be over between them. She knew that she had behaved badly to him, but it seemed to her that she was behaving better now to him than she had done before. She was grateful to him; she was ashamed of the past, and she was ashamed of breaking her engagement; but yet she felt that she was doing him a service. He had been very kind; her mother had said he had been kinder than she knew, because she did not as yet understand the burthens of married life; and from these burthens she was now about to release him. In one way she

had never deceived him; he had not asked for more than she could give: and thus it was that though she wrote her letter gravely, and a little mournfully, she did not feel overpowered by shame for what she had done, nor by pity for what she was about to do; and yet it was hard to her to write the letter; and though it was short, it was a long time before she could put her meaning into words:—

"DEAR MR. WARDE,

"This morning, Captain Cleasby has asked me to marry him. It was very sudden, and I was taken by surprise; but if it had not been sudden, I could have given him no other answer; and after he had spoken I could not have married anyone else. I know that I was engaged to you, and that I have broken my engagement very suddenly, and when I had given you no reason to think that there was any change. But until this morning there was no change. I think that I ought never to have promised to marry you. You were kind and generous

in wishing it, and now I believe that you will forgive me, because you are kind and generous always.

"Yours very gratefully,

"CHRISTINA NORTH."

Mr. Warde made no answer by letter, but in the evening he walked down to the White House, and asked to see Christina. She was sitting silently at her work, and rose up as he came in and held out her hand.

"I meant it for the best, Christina," he said; "but I suppose it was a mistake. Did you not know your own mind, or were you afraid to speak out?"

"I don't know—I meant—" she said, hesitating.

"Never mind," he said, with the considerate kindness which had made him like her always. "We will not go back upon the past. It has been a mistake. I thought that I could have made you happy; but as it is not to be, why should we make ourselves more unhappy about it than we can help?"

"Only I must say that I am sorry."

"No, Christina, you need not say that. It all rests between you and me; and if I do not blame you, no one else has a right to do so."

There was something so simple, and yet so generous, in the entire absence of reproach or self-pity; there was something so honest and true in his thought for her, that Christina looked up at him with a feeling of reverence as well as admiration. And yet he was no saint, but an unintellectual man, without sensitive perceptions, or perhaps the highest aspirations.

"I am afraid that you have difficulties before you, and you know you may always count upon my friendship; but first, Christina, I am going to preach a little. Do not think that you can choose your trials for yourself. They are all sent, as well as your blessings, and you must take them as they come, and make the best of them. You ran with the footmen, and you failed, and yet you would have thrust yourself into the swelling of Jordan. You

were dissatisfied and unhappy, and so you thought yourself capable of a great sacrifice; and in its accomplishment you hope to find an escape. Perhaps I should have thought of this, but I did not until I got your letter. I thought that if it had been so you would have spoken. If you are doing right now,—and remember, Christina, I do not blame you because of to-day,—if you are doing right in promising to marry Captain Cleasby, do not think that you will have nothing more that will be hard to bear; yet do not despair because there are lions in your path."

Then he left her, and went across the passage to see her grandfather. When Mr. North spoke to her again, he no longer refused to see Captain Cleasby, and his tone, though querulous, was no longer bitter. Then Christina knew that Mr. Warde had already put himself upon her side, and that at least she would have one powerful ally.

The day after, Captain Cleasby called for her; and she saw him again for the first time since their

meeting and their engagement. One day she had said that she must be free to make the announcement to her grandfather and her mother, and to write to Mr. Warde. Now these things had been done, done with less difficulty and pain than she had a right to expect, done comparatively so easily that she was remorseful and sorry, far more sorry than she would have been if the opposition she had had to encounter had been more violent and more sustained; and she was softened and humbled, feeling as if she had much to atone for. But yet she knew, in spite of it all, that at last she had found that for which unconsciously she had longed. It was not that she did not feel that there might be dangers to be met; only now they had no power to make her retrace her steps. She had thought herself strong, but he had conquered her.

She could not go down to meet him, as she had gone down to meet Mr. Warde. At the sound of his step on the gravel-walk the colour came flushing into her face, and she got up quickly, and went to

him half shyly, with her eyes glancing about in all directions, as they had a habit of doing when she was excited, and with a flitting smile hovering round her mouth.

"At last, Christina," he said, and he too smiled; "and how is it to be? It is too late for anyone to say no, but still for your sake I hope that I am to be forgiven."

"Grandpapa will see you," said Christina; but they did not go at once to the old man, but sat together in the front parlour, in that dingy little room into which the sunshine was used to creep slowly and stealthily, as into an unaccustomed place; but to-day it was filled with the sunshine of happiness, and Hope was standing at the door.

And the hour passed, as our happiest and saddest hours pass, so quickly that we can hardly understand their sweetness or their bitterness till it is gone and we shall know it no more; and then Mrs. North brought word that her father would see Captain Cleasby before he left the house.

"Yes, he is coming," said Christina: and she rose at once, and led the way across the passage, and knocked at the study door.

She wished that there might be no outward show of anger and reproach, and yet the meeting struck her as more melancholy than if there had been some sign of real feeling: for what is sadder than a form from which the spirit has for ever departed; a smile which would be friendly if it might, words of gratitude and kindness veiling the coldness of a heart?

Christina felt it instinctively as she stood in the doorway and watched the meeting,—her grandfather rising stiffly from his chair, and holding out his hand with apparent cordiality; the young man's graceful and indifferent bearing,—she understood it all, and turned away with a feeling of pain that it must be so always.

Yet before Captain Cleasby left the house he had done much to smooth away the difficulties in their path; and Mr. North had consented to the

marriage taking place so soon as Walter should have got his affairs into order.

"I ought to have been straight before now," he said; "but these lawyers are for ever making difficulties, and as a matter of fact, though I have been six months at the Park, I have not come into my property yet. I think I shall have to run up to London to see about things, and in the meantime Christina can be making her preparations, so that we can be married, when I return, at once. I never saw the use of making such a fuss over weddings, and bothering oneself with a whole heap of aunts and uncles. We mean to do it in our own way, don't we, Christina?"

Christina had as yet given no thought at all to the wedding. It was all so new, and she was wrapt up in her present happiness, and she had never imagined it would be so soon. But when he appealed to her, she did not hesitate a moment.

"Yes, of course," she said; "but why must you

go away now? Can't the lawyers do without you? I am sure they don't want you."

"You don't understand, Christina," said Mr. North. "Captain Cleasby is quite right; a man should always look after his affairs for himself, and then perhaps there wouldn't be so many poor fools ruined in this world. Trust yourself, and depend on yourself, and look about you,—that's my advice: and there's many a young fellow would have been glad had he followed it instead of taking his ease, whilst his money was being thrown to the dogs:—yes, and his good name too, if he had only known it, and all through some one he trusted as a friend,—lucky for him if it wasn't his own flesh and blood."

It was a long speech for Mr. North, and he ended in a low mournful cadence, so that they hardly caught his last words. Christina knew that he was thinking of his son, and of his own misfortunes; she was softened and pitiful, and encouraged by his taking Captain Cleasby's part even upon a trifling subject.

"You must not think so much of old times," she said gently; "I think the world has grown better. And we are all going to be good and happy, like the people at the end of a fairy tale; and you must forget about the past, and be fond of him for my sake—won't you, grandpapa?"

She was sitting on the arm of her grandfather's chair, and Captain Cleasby was close to her on the other side, leaning against the low chimney-piece, and as she spoke she reached out her hand for one of his, and put it in the old man's.

"Say something nice to him, grandpapa!"

Captain Cleasby smiled, but not sarcastically, and waited a little curiously for what would follow.

"I'm not saying he's worse than others, and I'm not saying he's better," said Mr. North slowly. "I could have wished Christina had married a man I knew and could have trusted. I don't say I don't trust you, sir, but you're young, and you're a stranger, and Christina there has as much prudence as a baby, and wouldn't believe a tiger was treacherous

till he had torn her in pieces; but what's the use of standing out? I said I wasn't going to stand out, and I'll stick to it. Christina has chosen for herself, and you have chosen for yourself, and I believe the name and the thought of the old place went against you at first; but there! I don't take much account of that now, and I have not got anything more to say against you than that you are a stranger to me."

"But time will do something for me there," said Walter. He was not angry, but, on the contrary, rather honoured the old man for his open speaking.

"It may or it may not," said Mr. North. "I am old, and I don't understand present fashions, nor the young men now-a-days and their goings on. There's a great deal I don't understand and don't want to understand. You've got the thing that matters most to me now in this world: keep her what she is now, with all her faith in truth and constancy and happiness unshaken; and then I'll say God bless you, and thank you too."

Captain Cleasby's attention had wandered a little during the first part of Mr. North's speech, and he had been looking at Christina, who still sat with her hand in the old man's. He remembered how he had seen her first in the same oak parlour by the flickering light of the fire, as he saw her at this moment, only now her startled curious look had given place to one of thoughtful happiness, and the smile which had hovered around her mouth was banished only by the solemnity of her grandfather's words. But as Mr. North ended, Captain Cleasby withdrew his eyes from her and came a little forward.

"I will do my best, sir," he said. "Of course you are right: I am a stranger, and you have no particular reason to place confidence in me, except that you knew my father; but I hope you don't want us to wait. It is done now, you know, and I hope you won't consider that waiting is any good. I must go up to see these lawyers, and then of course I will do anything you like in the way of settlements."

"It isn't the settlements," said Mr. North, perversely; "it all looks very pretty—I know it always does when people are young—and I'm not saying anything special against you; but I have seen enough of it in my time to last my life. There's Mary—well, it was all a bright look-out for her once, and what did it come to? And there was my poor Margaret—married nine months and left a widow; and if it's going to be like that with Christina—well, I suppose I can't prevent it, only I'd sooner it was after I am dead and out of the way of seeing it."

"But it won't be like that, will it, Christina?" said Captain Cleasby, softly.

"I can't hear what you say, nor can't see you either," said Mr. North, discontentedly. "For the matter of that, I have said yes, and may have done with it; but I am quicker at forgetting than at remembering now, and I don't suppose I should know you if I was to meet you in the street."

Captain Cleasby turned to the chimney-piece, struck a match, and lighted one of the tall candles

which stood upon it, took it in his hand, and held it so that the light fell full upon his face as he stood before Mr. North, composed and grave, whilst the old man's eager eyes looked him all over. It was a refined and distinguished face: the expression, although not distinctively frank, had nothing to make you doubt its truth; the grey eyes looked straight before them, and the delicate lines of the mouth had a determined look about them which gave a manliness to the face it might otherwise have lacked, for it was wanting in broad outlines and marked features, and gave you rather the impression of a pencil sketch than of a finished drawing. But as he stood there quietly with the strong light upon him, there was something so independent and unfearing, and yet so courteous and deferential in his manner, and in the mode he had chosen of dissipating the old man's suspicions, that the cloud cleared from Mr. North's forehead, and he held out his hand to him with a cordiality which had as yet had no place in his conduct.

"I believe I wronged you. I wronged you, I daresay: but things have gone badly with me of late, and Christina here is about the only thing that remains to me, and she had disappointed me. She should have known her own mind sooner; but we won't say any more about that. I don't say but it may turn out better than I should have thought."

"I think so," said Captain Cleasby. He was not a man to make protestations. "Won't you believe that, as Christina says, we are going to be good and happy?"

Then for the first time Mr. North saw the peculiar charm of his smile, and he was conquered.

"You may, you may—I trust you may," he said rather tremulously, and brushed his hand hastily across his eyes. He was growing weak, poor old man, and he could not talk of things that excited him for long at a time without being agitated; and soon after Captain Cleasby took his leave. His sister was all alone, and would be waiting dinner for him, but yet he lingered for a moment at the

door in the soft autumn twilight before he wished Christina good-night.

"What a little time ago it is!" he said. "Just think, Christina, only yesterday you thought you were going to marry some one else. You are very fickle, I am afraid. I am astonished at my own imprudence in trusting myself to you. Whom will you be going to marry to-morrow, I wonder?"

Christina thought of Bernard, and of Mr. Warde, and her self-reproach was too keen, and her regrets too oppressive, to allow her to answer him lightly or indifferently.

"Don't," she said; "please don't. Don't talk about it. I think happiness makes one feel what one has done wrong more: when I was so unhappy, it didn't seem as if it mattered so much."

"Don't make yourself unhappy about it now, then. After all, it did me, or might have done me, more harm than anyone else. I don't consider that Warde has half—no, not a quarter as much to

forgive as I have; if I can give you absolution, I am sure he may. Only, you understand, that it is a little fault which must not be repeated."

Of course he could not know how much real ground for misery and remorse there had been. He had been more moved than he chose to show by Mr. North's fears and reluctance to part with his granddaughter, and it was a sort of reaction from the mood of the last half-hour which made him now disposed to get rid of his unusual sense of responsibility and gravity by talking lightly. But Christina was disturbed that he should speak carelessly of what had touched her so deeply.

"It hurts me to think of it," she said: and he saw the tears in her eyes.

"Forgive me!" he said, quickly; "I ought to have thought of that. Don't let me go away feeling that I have made you unhappy. You know I don't blame you for a moment: we are going to forget all that, dearest. My life has been an unsatisfactory one. Gusty will tell you I am not good for much

but it is too late now, isn't it? Say you forgive me, Christina, before I go."

Silently she put both her hands in his, and they stood there together for a minute looking out at the dusky twilight, through which the stars were faintly shining, on across the heath and the white road to the trees of the Park, and the light beyond on the top of the hill.

"It is a new heaven and earth to me," he said, "since we stand in the world together."

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